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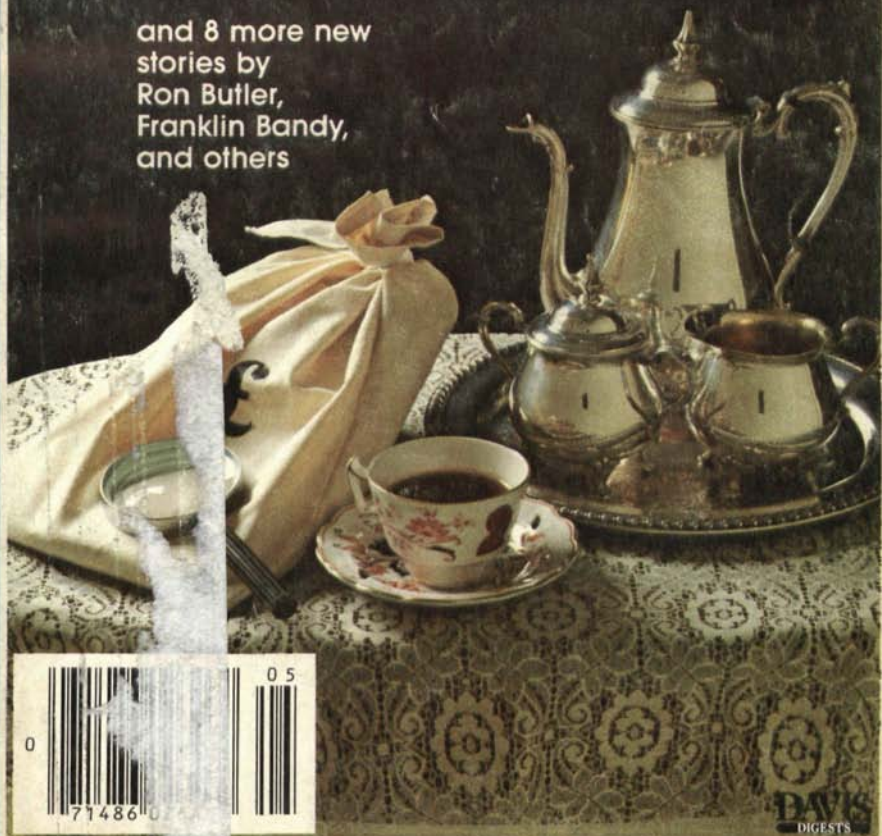
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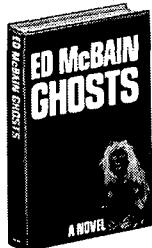
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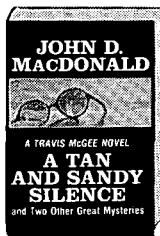
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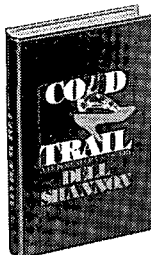
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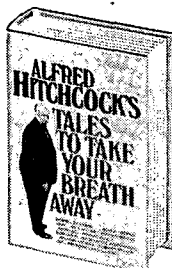
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 27, No. 2, February 3, 1982. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.25 a copy. Annual subscription \$16.25 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$18.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. © 1981 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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Dear Readers:



Some of you may have noticed that, beginning with the December issue, this magazine's masthead has borne the name of a new editor. Eleanor Sullivan, who edited AHMM with distinction for the past seven years, as well as acting as managing editor for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, will now be devoting all her time to the latter as its editor, an endeavor in which all of us who have to do with AHMM want to wish her very well indeed.

The business of changing editors is, of course, a complicated one, a result of the lead time necessary in the printing and publishing process. This is, consequently, the first chance I have had to introduce myself to AHMM's readers, and—still—the printer's time and the magazine's space are short. So let me just, for the moment, say that we would all like to hear from you. What you like about AHMM. What you think might be added (or subtracted) to its advantage.

We have, in short, some Coming Attractions in mind, and a longer magazine (but one, of course, with at least as much fiction as at present). To that end, we'd be glad for your suggestions. (Mystery readers, we have considerable occasion to believe, are an especially perceptive bunch.)

In the meantime, we hope the present issue gives you pleasure.

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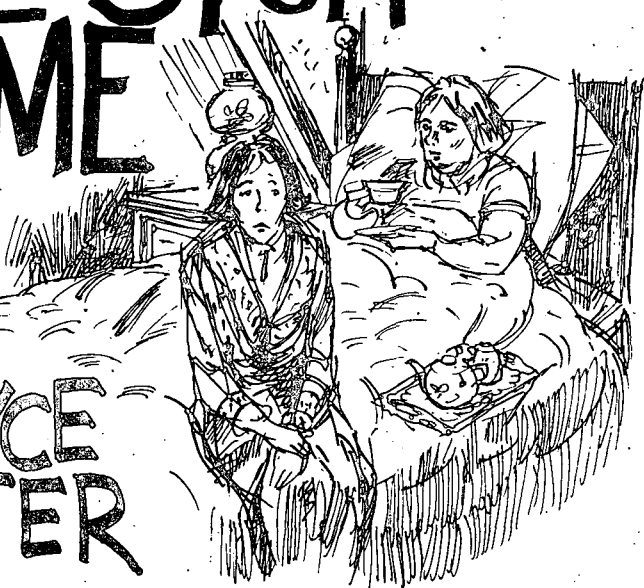
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It was not for nothing, the Hon. Con thought, that she was known as Totterbridge's Finest . . .

THE STUFF OF CRIME

by
JOYCE
PORTER



"Taxidermy, dear?"

The Honourable Constance Morrison-Burke scowled. It was ever thus! The minute a chap tried to branch out and widen the old horizons, somebody had to start carping. She glared at the somebody. "I shan't make a mess."

Miss Jones rose, a trifle creakily, from the hearth rug where she'd been

on her hands and knees dusting behind the electric fire. She always dusted behind the electric fire on Tuesdays. "Are you sure, dear?"

It was just one more skirmish in the long-running domestic drama between the Honourable Constance and her chum, social mentor, and general doormat, Miss Jones. It was the Honourable Constance who got the super ideas and Miss Jones who—loyal and loving to the death, of course, but aware of who was going to be left picking up the pieces—tried to temper them with touches of expediency and common sense.

The trouble was that the Hon. Con (as she was universally called behind her back), being wealthy, unmarried, and barely house-trained, wanted for occupation. In the past she had tried joining things but her wholehearted participation had proved so disruptive that few clubs or societies had survived long enough to throw her out. She had bulldozed her way through virtually everything Totterbridge—the small town in which she lived—had to offer in the way of sport or culture. Even charitable organizations, usually so eager for new recruits, found they couldn't cope with her, and their socially underprivileged clients were usually reduced to begging on their knees for mercy after only a couple of encounters.

There had been a time, though, when the Hon. Con thought she'd cracked it. This was when she'd discovered, quite by chance, that she was one of Nature's private detectives. A new era had seemed to be dawning. At long last she was going to be able to give free rein to her intelligence, her tenacity, her courage, her imagination, and her incurable propensity for sticking her nose into other people's business. Unfortunately, things had not turned out so rosily. This was partly due to the shortsighted, dog-in-the-manger attitude of the local police and partly to the fact that crime in Totterbridge was not as thick on the ground as some people might have wished. In between one dismembered body in the left-luggage office at the bus station and the next, there were yawning chasms of inactivity and boredom.

— Hence the taxidermy.

Miss Jones straightened out the ornaments on the mantelpiece. "You're not proposing to do it upstairs in the spare room, are you, dear?"

"Course not!" snorted the Hon. Con, revising her original plans with the speed of light. "Give me some credit, Bones! I'll use the garden shed."

It was November and the garden shed, assembled by the Hon. Con with her own hands, could provide both icicles and mushrooms in high

summer. Not that Miss Jones, battle-hardened in the fight against some of the Hon. Con's pottier enthusiasms, was going to waste time getting her friend to use a bit of common sense. She merely changed the subject. "Are you ready for your coffee, dear?"

The Hon. Con had been in the public library all morning, and riffling away through all those dusty tomes for a hobby worthy of her skill had made her thirsty. Clutching a slim volume of do-it-yourself taxidermy, she followed Miss Jones into the kitchen. "The thing about it, Bones," she explained pompously, "is that it's artistic, really. It's not all dead bodies and chemicals. One chap used to make up little tableaux with kittens, sort of dressed up in frocks and school uniforms and things."

Miss Jones, filling the electric kettle, rather eloquently said nothing.

The Hon. Con was nothing like as insensitive as some people liked to think. She realized that old Bones was not exactly enamored with this latest hobby. Time to soft pedal. There was, moreover, the question of biscuits—goodies which Miss Jones, as the self-appointed guardian of the Hon. Con's waistline, had in her darker moods been known to withhold.

The Hon. Con tucked her library book out of sight down the waistband of her trousers. "Anything happen while I was out?"

"Oh, yes, dear, I meant to tell you. Mrs. Cutbush rang. She's had to cancel our invitation to tea this afternoon."

The Hon. Con took the news with commendable stoicism. Daisy Cutbush was all right, but her father—the venerable Huxstep—was an undiluted pain in the neck. The Hon. Con couldn't stand the crack-brained old fogey and, if he referred to her once more as the fairest rose of Totterbridge, full blown but still unplucked, she'd—"How come?" she asked as she watched Miss Jones take down the biscuit tin from the shelf.

"Well, it was all a little incoherent, actually, dear. Mrs. Cutbush was in quite a state. It seems there'd been some horrid road accident in the Avenue and Mr. Huxstep was involved in some way."

"Dead is he?" inquired the Hon. Con hopefully. "There ought to be a driving test for tricycles, you know. And an age limit. They go a bit soft in the head when they get over eighty. I've seen old Huxstep on his tricycle. He thinks he can snap his fingers at the entire Highway Code if he rings his bell loud enough. I told him the last—"

"Oh, no, I think Mr. Huxstep is quite all right, dear." Miss Jones doled out one measly biscuit and set it on a plate in front of the Hon. Con. Then she joined her at the table in the dinette, thankful to take the weight

off her feet for a few minutes. "I gathered that much. There was something about a car though. Poor Mrs. Cutbush sounded quite distraught. She said there was wreckage and ambulances and policemen everywhere."

"P'raps I'd better tootle around and see if I can lend a helping paw."

"Oh, no, dear!" Miss Jones responded a mite too sharply. "I'm sure they've got absolutely all the help they need. All they want is a little breathing space while they sort things out."

The Hon. Con didn't pursue the matter. She had more exciting prospects in view than playing the Samaritan. "'Spect all the gory details'll be in the local paper anyhow," she observed philosophically. "You might pop round next door later on and borrow their copy."

There had been a time when the Hon. Con would have cheerfully done all the popping and borrowing herself. The next-doors were a hospitable couple who could even be relied on to wheel in the old sherry bottle if you got your timing right. That was before all the brouhaha, of course, about the Hon. Con's lettuce seeds and their cat and the Hon. Con's boomerang and their phone call to the local branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals which had resulted in the Hon. Con being obliged to demonstrate to the inspector chappie that she couldn't, as of yet, hit a stationary elephant at twenty paces never mind a fleet-footed moggie legging it for dear life through last year's brussels sprouts. Nowadays the Hon. Con left fraternization with next door strictly to Miss Jones.

"Whacko," said the Hon. Con, pushing her chair back and wondering for a brief moment where that old boomerang had got to. "This won't buy the baby a new frock!" She ambled off upstairs to her den in the spare room to make a start on taxidermy and left the field clear for Miss Jones to get on with cleaning the cooker.

When the Hon. Con eventually got her hands on the local paper early that evening, all her most sanguine hopes were most gratifyingly confirmed. "What did I tell you?" she trumpeted as Miss Jones wearily removed her hat and coat and knuckled down to preparing supper. "One dead, one in intensive care, and the car a total writeoff! Old Huxstep'll get ten years for this! That's if they don't shut him up in a loony bin for the rest of his natural."

Miss Jones, who had managed to get a quick look at the brief paragraph,

felt obliged to demur in the interests of fair play. "It doesn't actually *say* it was Mr. Huxstep's fault, does it, dear?"

"Says the old crackpot was treated for shock and that his tricycle wasn't damaged. What more do you want? The case is *sub judice*. They've got to be careful what they print."

Miss Jones's eyebrows barely flickered, but the Hon. Con was in no mood for argument.

"You've got to read between the lines, Bones," she pointed out in a manner which some people, less forbearing than Miss Jones, might have found offensively patronizing. "It's as clear as mud what happened. Old Huxstep came roaring out of that drive of theirs at his usual ninety miles an hour, looking neither to right nor left, just as this car comes down the Avenue. The car swerves—mistakenly—to avoid hitting the silly old muggins, skids on the fallen leaves, and Bob's your uncle! Having scattered death and destruction all round him, he naturally gets off without a blooming scratch."

"It doesn't say who the people were in the car, does it, dear?"

The Hon. Con shook her head. "Just two men. Strangers, of course."

"Really, dear?"

"Come on, Bones," begged the Hon. Con, forgetting that not everyone was blessed with her powers of ratiocination, "give the old brain box a rattle! They must have been proceeding at a rate of knots to do this amount of damage. Holy cats, the chap who was killed ended up in the Williamsses' front garden, a hundred yards away on the other side of the road. Nobody local would have been driving at that speed, not down the Avenue. Everybody knows what a menace old Huxstep is—blind as a bat and deaf as a doorpost and pigheaded with it. I never do more than twenty in the Avenue," she added virtuously, "just in case he happens to be out on the loose."

And on that self-congratulatory note the matter rested. The Hon. Con was soon up to her neck (and drowning) in the increasingly disgusting ramifications of taxidermy while Miss Jones unexpectedly put her foot down. To borrow the local newspaper from next door once in an emergency was permissible, she pointed out. To keep on borrowing it night after night could look dangerously like an imposition. The Hon. Con huffed and puffed at such misplaced delicacy, but to no avail. If the idea that she might perhaps purchase her own copy did cross her mind, it flitted through too rapidly for her to catch it. . . .

Interest revived all round, however, when a week later Mrs. Cutbush telephoned again and reissued her invitation to tea. The Hon. Con took the call and was miffed to find that Mrs. Cutbush was unwilling to discuss the details of the Avenue massacre on the grounds that it had really been too awful and they were trying to forget about it.

Miss Jones proved to be of like mind and read the Hon. Con quite a prim little lecture on the subject as they drove in the Mini to keep their engagement.

"Put a sock in it, Bones," pleaded the Hon. Con. "I won't mention it unless he does. Scout's honor. I'm not the type to kick a bloke when he's down. Besides, I doubt if he'll be there. They don't give you bail on a murder charge. Or manslaughter," she amended quickly in case old Bones was going to start splitting hairs.

There is a fair chance that the Hon. Con would have kept her solemn word if old Mr. Huxstep hadn't got right up her nose almost as soon as she'd got one well polished brogue across the threshold.

"Hello, there, Constance!" His delight at seeing her was as false as his teeth. "How are you these days?" His rheumy eyes flashed maliciously. "Still patiently waiting for Mr. Right to come along, eh?"

That more or less did it. The Hon. Con tossed aside the kid gloves and sank the boot in without a qualm. "Afternoon, Mr. Huxstep!" she boomed, knowing full well how it infuriated him to be thought hard of hearing. "Understand you've been having a spot of trouble! I can give you the name of a dashed good solicitor! He's something of a specialist in defending cases of dangerous driving!"

Old Mr. Huxstep, who been on the receiving end of a few well chosen words from his daughter about the courtesies due to guests, heroically held onto his smile.

"What makes you think I need a solicitor, Constance?"

"Good grief, you're not proposing to defend yourself, are you? At your age?" The Hon. Con pursed her lips and shook her head. "I don't recommend it, old bean."

Mr. Huxstep took a deep breath. "You're looking very bonnie, Constance," he remarked. "Almost blooming. You've put on a bit of weight since I saw you last. It suits you."

The Hon. Con didn't care tuppence how much she tipped the scales at, but Miss Jones did, and careless comments like that might well harbingering another turn in the dietary screw. "It's difficult to get enough

exercise now the nights are drawing in," she growled. "Been thinking of taking up cycling. Heard you might have a tricycle going cheap."

In desperation Mr. Huxstep turned to Miss Jones. "And how are you, Miss, er—?"

"They won't let you ride a tricycle in prison," said the Hon. Con.

"Prison?" Mr. Huxstep's squeak of outrage was painful to hear.

The Hon. Con chuckled. "You'll be telling me next the cops aren't going to charge you with manslaughter."

"I do wish you'd refrain from making these wild allegations, Constance!"

Daisy Cutbush sounded quite cross as she came into the drawing room with the silver teapot in nice time to save her father the trouble of going into one of his queer turns. "It wasn't Daddy's fault. He was lucky he wasn't killed himself. That car was doing at least eighty miles an hour."

"Says who?"

"They can tell by the skid marks." Mrs. Cutbush put the teapot down and threw a distracted smile in Miss Jones's direction. Really, one didn't quite know where one was with Miss Jones. Was she a paid employee or one of us? If she was supposed to be the Hon. Con's keeper, thought Mrs. Cutbush bitterly as she reached for the silver milk jug, it was a pity she didn't keep her charge on a damned-sight tighter rein.

"And the force of the impact, Constance. You should have seen the Avenue! It was strewn with wreckage like a battlefield, wasn't it, Daddy?"

"Like the Blitz," agreed Mr. Huxstep nostalgically. "Bits of the car, scraps of clothing, blood and bodies flung 'round all over the place. They found one shoe in the Colonel's apple tree and its mate in a drain at the back of Miss Fowler's garage. And the front passenger seat—that finished up plastered against young Johnston's front gate, fifty yards from where the car hit the tree. The tree's damaged beyond repair," he said sorrowfully, "but the Council are going to plant us another one."

The Hon. Con accepted a cup of tea from Daisy Cutbush and helped herself to a sandwich. Afternoon tea with old Daisy was all very posh and gracious living, but you didn't get what the Hon. Con called a good blowout. She demolished the sandwich—cucumber, paper-thin and no crust—at one gulp and ripped the conversational ball out of Mr. Huxstep's gnarled and enfeebled hands. "It's the blast," she announced with unshakable authority. "You get totally unpredictable results. That's why one poor blighter finishes up with a broken neck in somebody's bed of peonies and other folk"—an indignant Mr. Huxstep was treated to a long and

pénetrating look—"walk out smelling of roses. Must have been your lucky day, old chap." She took another sandwich while the going was good. "Specially if they aren't going to prosecute you. I mean, it was practically murder, wasn't it?"

She leaned forward conspiratorially. "How did you get away with it? Slip 'em a good hefty bribe or"—at times the Hon. Con's standards slipped well below those expected of a gentleman—"just persuade 'em you're too gaga to stand trial?"

There was a general gasp all round and Mr. Huxstep took a second or two to catch his breath. When he'd recovered, though, he came out fighting. Together with his daughter, her husband, and the rest of the household he had been sworn to secrecy by the local C.I.D. inspector but, like most people confronted by the Hon. Con at her most disruptive, he happily chucked his word of honor and his responsibilities as a good citizen clean out of the window.

"You may care to know, Constance," he said, quivering with the desire to trample this tank-woman into the dust, "that, far from considering taking me to court, the police will be recommending me for a reward!"

The Hon. Con. took these senile ramblings with kindly indulgence. "A reward for what, old chap? Helping solve the population explosion?"

"For catching a gang of bank robbers singlehanded!" screamed Mr. Huxstep before his daughter could stop him. He beat his fists impotently on the arms of his chair. "So—put that on your needles and knit it!"

The Hon. Con rose magnificently above the sexist implications of this injunction and sank her teeth into the heart of the problem. Her noble brow creased in a deep frown. "Those men in the car were *bank robbers*?" Her face cleared. Luckily, as the acknowledged expert in criminal matters in that particular neck of the woods, she had all this sort of information at her fingertips.

"The security van that got done outside the bank at Abbots Cross!" When the Hon. Con got her hands on a free newspaper she read it from cover to cover. The issue which had carried the account of Mr. Huxstep's mayhem had also devoted a couple of paragraphs to a bank holdup which had taken place a little earlier that same morning. The Hon. Con struck herself on the forehead. Muggins! Fancy her failing to put two and two together. She stared at Mr. Huxstep with new respect. "They got away with twenty thousand pounds, didn't they?"

"More like forty!" bragged Mr. Huxstep, stubbornly ignoring his daughter.

ter's anguished reminders that they weren't supposed to utter a word about this to anybody.

The Hon. Con was ever gallant to a damsel in distress. "You know me, Daisy, old bean," she said reassuringly. "The soul of discretion." She turned back to the hero of the hour. "Forty thousand, eh? And you'll get what—ten percent?"

Mr. Huxstep's smirk was making his jaw ache. "Well, it's early days yet to be thinking about actual figures," he said as though it didn't matter a toss, "but there'll be no disputing my claim. The police were in hot pursuit of these blighters, but they were getting away." He threw his pigeon chest out. "They'd have escaped completely if it hadn't been for me and my tricycle."

But it was the money that had caught the Hon. Con's imagination. "And there was forty thousand quid in that car?"

Daisy Cutbush was refilling Miss Jones's teacup. "Not exactly, Constance," she said. "The two men in our car were only half the gang. There were two more men in another car and they made a clean getaway and haven't been captured yet. They were the ones with the money. In a bag, apparently. That's why Daddy doesn't quite know where he stands financially, you see. The bank won't pay out any reward until they've got their money back."

The Hon. Con felt a lot happier. "So if the cops don't collar the ring-leaders with the lolly, His Nibs here won't collect a sausage?"

"The police'll catch 'em all right," declared Mr. Huxstep stoutly. "It's just a matter of time. They'll trace them through the two bounders I foiled."

"Still," said the Hon. Con, shaking her head, "if you only stopped a couple of the small fry—"

"Small fry be buggered! I caught the masterminds! Top criminals, the pair of 'em! They've got a string of major robberies behind them as long as your arm—they're wanted in every country in Europe! I'm a public benefactor, I am, Inspector Davis said so!"

"Constance"—Daisy Cutbush had finished pouring second cups out all round and could now turn her attention to enticing pussy back into the bag again—"you will keep all this strictly *entre nous*, won't you? And Miss Jones too, of course." She smiled vaguely at her other guest. "The thing is that we were all asked most definitely by the police not to utter a word about this to absolutely anybody. They're still working on it, you

see. Trying to catch these other two with the money. That's why they haven't released any details yet, about the men's names or the car number or anything. I'm sure"—Daisy Cutbush had no qualms about laying it on with a trowel in an emergency—"that you of all people, Constance, with your experience and everything, appreciate the need for discretion."

The Hon. Con admitted that, being in much the same line of business herself, she did indeed fully understand and sympathize with the problems of the police. "Speaking of which, Daisy," she added, "there is one small point I don't quite get the hang of. If the two villains your aged pater here so crushingly rendered *hors de combat* were the big cheeses, why—?"

At which precise moment, and by pure chance, Mrs. Cutbush's married daughter arrived complete with a nearly new baby and put the Hon. Con's nose right out of joint. One of life's little ironies. Everybody (including, to the Hon. Con's disgust, Miss Jones) forgot all about sudden death and violent crime to coo and cluck over what was, really, little more than a rather smelly bundle of old clothes. It was only when Stephanie, Mrs. Cutbush's daughter, had provided every possible detail about the brat's current eating, sleeping, and potting habits that anybody over the age of two months and seven days was given a look in. Even then it was on old Mr. Huxstep that the spotlight turned.

"And how are you, Grandad?" inquired Stephanie, coming over and settling herself on the arm of his chair. "Keeping well, are you, darling?"

The way the old fool glowed under his granddaughter's caresses made the Hon. Con want to throw up.

"Have they examined your tricycle properly for damage?" asked Stephanie tenderly, kissing the bald spot on the top of Mr. Huxstep's head. "You mustn't go out on it until they do because you never know. Something might have got broken or twisted or something."

"Pity you don't persuade your grandfather to chuck that tricycle in, Stephanie," said the Hon. Con crossly. "Next time it might be him they're scraping off the pavement."

"Nonsense!" retorted Stephanie with fond indignation. "You're as safe as houses, aren't you, darling?" She bent over and gave Mr. Huxstep another affectionate kiss.

"He's past it," insisted the Hon. Con, knowing you had to be cruel to be kind—and loving it. "He'd be better off in a home."

"Oh, don't be so awful, Miss Morrison-Burke! Grandad's as bright as plenty of people half his age!"

"Such as who, for example?" The Hon. Con averted her eyes from the spectacle of Miss Jones ostentatiously pulling on her gloves and emitting little signals of imminent departure.

"Well—" Stephanie floundered for a moment as the Hon. Con had known she would. "There's the Plumbes."

"The Plumbes?"

"The couple next door, Constance," explained Mr. Huxstep dryly. "Retired doctor and his wife. Nice, quiet, respectable people. You wouldn't know them."

"What about 'em?"

Stephanie turned to include her mother in the conversation. "I meant to tell you, Mumsie," she said. "It was so funny. It was last week—Wednesday. I drove back home over Lutterworth Moor. It was a rotten day but it's so gorgeous up there and I do think it's important for babies to be exposed to beauty right from the start, don't you? Did I tell you we play Beethoven to Ashcroft every day and we're going to decorate his nursery with some marvelous reproductions we got from the National Gallery?"

The Hon. Con sighed. Why was it that the prettiest girls always had minds like crack-brained butterflies. "The Plumbes, old bean!"

Stephanie blinked. "Oh, yes. Well, they were just sitting there."

"On Lutterworth Moor?"

"In the pouring rain. It was frightfully chilly, too."

"On chairs?"

"No, just on one of the boulders by the road."

Daisy Cutbush spoke quietly so as not to inconvenience the sleeping baby. "But what were they *doing*, dear?"

"Absolutely nothing, Mumsie. That's the point. Miss Morrison-Burke seems to think it's only Grandad who does funny things. I'm just saying that other people are just as odd. Dr. Plumbe must be at least twenty years younger than Grandad, but there he was, with his wife, sitting on a boulder in the rain. It was beginning to get dark too."

"Bird-watching," said the Hon. Con. "Nature study. Star gazing. Photographing the sunset."

"You don't know the Plumbes," objected Mr. Huxstep. "Fresh-air fiends they are not. Had they got the car, Stephanie?"

"There was one parked in a lay-by, I think. Why?"

"I was just wondering if they'd got rid of it. He was talking about it. I think they're beginning to feel the pinch a bit now that he's retired."

The Hon. Con couldn't care less about the Plumbes' financial difficulties and reduced circumstances. "One swallow," she pointed out obstinately, "doesn't make a summer and there's probably some perfectly logical explanation for their behavior. It certainly doesn't prove that your grandfather here isn't a jolly sight more eccentric—to put it kindly—than most."

"All right!" said Stephanie with understandable exasperation. "Do you know Mr. Nichols?"

For most of the afternoon Miss Jones had been sitting quietly, praying that the floor might open up and swallow her, but now, emboldened by a knowledge of local tittle-tattle second to none, she dipped one timid toe into the discussion. "Do you mean the greengrocer perhaps, Mrs. Stephenson? The one with the big mustache in Oliver Road?"

"That's him!" Stephanie nodded at the Hon. Con. "Did you know he wears ladies' underwear, even when he's serving in his shop? If that isn't kinky—"

The Hon. Con dismissed the suggestion. "Everything's unisex these days." Well, wasn't she wearing cavalry twill trousers made by her late father's Savile Row tailors and a striped shirt from the Marks & Spencer's men's department summer sale?

"Pink knickers with lace inserts on a middle-aged shopkeeper with a wife and six children is hardly unisex, Miss Morrison-Burke, even if he does wear a brown overall on top. And what about Lady Walsh and her pig?"

"Oh, everybody knows about Lady Walsh and her blooming pig!" The Hon. Con was getting bored.

"All right"—there seemed no end to Stephanie Stephenson's total recall of Totterbridge screwballs—"what about that teenager who claimed he'd been on board a Martian spaceship that landed in the Corn Market? Somebody from the telly actually came down to interview him."

"They didn't show it though, dear," said her mother soothingly. She tore her eyes away from the baby's face long enough to glance at the clock. "Good heavens, is that the time?"

The Hon. Con seized what seemed to her a heaven-sent opportunity. "Chop, chop, Bones!" she exhorted her chum briskly. "Time we were getting cracking! I've got a lot to do this evening, even if you haven't."

The Hon. Con and Miss Jones began to say their goodbyes.

"Can't think what you were getting into such a tizzy about, Stephanie," grumbled the Hon. Con as they tried to wake old Mr. ing great reward for itHuxstep up. "There's nothing as queer as folk. Everybody knows that."

"I like that!" Like most young people these days, Stephanie had scant respect for her elders and betters. "You were the one who said Grandad was going soft in the head! All I did was demonstrate there are plenty who are dafter than he is, and nobody thinks they should be shut up in an institution. If you ask me," she went on, recalling where this ridiculous conversation had started, "there's nothing much wrong with a man who can capture a gang of ruthless criminals single-handed *and* collect a whacking great reward for it as well!"

It was three o'clock on the following morning when the Hon. Con's subconscious came churning up with the answer, and proved yet again that it was not for nothing that she was known, in the world of private eyes, as Totterbridge's Finest. The problem had, of course, been nagging away all evening at the back of her mind and had at times threatened to get between her and the study of taxidermy, but it was only in the wee small hours that total comprehension had dawned like thunder.

The Hon. Con had several faults, but selfishness was not one of them. Having discovered not only the answer but the riddle as well, she didn't hesitate for one second before sharing it.

After Miss Jones had gone downstairs, made a nice hot pot of tea, and brought it up to her bedroom, the Hon. Con tucked up warm in bed, said, "Recall what we were nattering about at tea, Bones?"

"I think so, dear." Miss Jones couldn't quite keep the tremble out of her voice.

"Didn't all that guff about the getaway car strike you as odd?"

"In what way, dear?"

The Hon. Con accepted a steaming cup of tea and examined the tray. No biscuits? Oh, well. "According to the cops, there were four men in the gang—right? When they'd done the robbery, they split up, the two leaders going in the car that was smashed up and the two underlings nipping off in some other car—right?"

"I imagine so, dear." Miss Jones unobtrusively swallowed four aspirins.

"Well, didn't it strike you as jolly funny that the big chiefs let the

Indians take the money? Holy cats, if I masterminded a daring raid like that I'd hang onto the loot myself like grim death. Wouldn't you, Bones?"

Miss Jones did her best to think positively, though it was frightfully difficult when your nerves were still twanging and you knew you were going to have one of your migraines. "Maybe it was an accident, dear. Something that occurred in the heat of the moment."

The Hon. Con shook her head. "Never! They plan these things down to the last detail. Specially where the money's concerned. That's what it's all about, isn't it? No, my theory is that the stolen money *was* in the car old Huxstep smashed up in the Avenue."

In spite of herself Miss Jones pictured the scene—Mr. Huxstep and his tricycle, the car crumpled and smoking where it had crashed into somebody's wall, bodies and debris scattered in all directions, blood—

The Hon. Con grinned. "Got it, old girl?"

Miss Jones knew the dangers of being too clever. The Hon. Con liked to father her own bright ideas. "You mean the packet of money could have been thrown out of the car at the time of the crash, dear?"

The Hon. Con rocked with excitement. "And?"

Miss Jones eased her back. The foot of a bed is not the most comfortable place to sit for a break-of-dawn chat, nor the warmest. "And somebody found it, dear? And kept it?"

"Not just 'somebody'!"

"The police, dear?"

"Possible." Though a staunch supporter of law and order, the Hon. Con had had too many bruising encounters with Our Brave Boys in Blue to be entirely starry-eyed about their role in society. "But I reckon that money was found before the cops arrived on the scene."

Miss Jones sipped her tea uneasily. "That leaves one of the neighbors, dear."

"That leaves the Plumbers!" chortled the Hon. Con. "Who else? Look—they hear the crash, come rushing out to see what's going on, and find forty thousand quid lying on their garden path. Temptation with a capital T."

"Mr. Huxstep said they were feeling the pinch now he's retired," said Miss Jones before she could stop herself. Well, even at three-thirty A.M. there is such a thing as Christian charity and always looking for the best in people. "Constance dear, I'm sure—"

"So'm I, Bones! And that's what they were doing up on Lutterworth

Moor the day after the crash in the dark and the rain—they were burying the booty!”

“Burying it?” Miss Jones sounded very doubtful.

It was fortunate that the Hon. Con had got the whole thing worked out. “Where else could they hide it? You’ve got to look at it from their point of view, Bones. Sooner or later even the cops are going to work it out that the stolen money was in that car at the time of the accident. Then what? They’ll come round making a thorough house-to-house search in the Avenue. It’ll be a real professional job with a fine-tooth comb and no stone left unturned. Where on earth could the Plumbes hide that money and be a hundred percent sure the cops won’t find it? The hiding place has got to be a hundred percent sure because if it isn’t the Plumbes haven’t just lost a small fortune—their reputation’s gone down the drain, and probably their liberty too.”

Miss Jones wrapped her dressing gown more closely more closely round her shoulders and shivered.

“That’s why it had to be Lutterworth Moor,” said the Hon. Con. “Even if by some miracle the money’s discovered up there, there’s nothing to tie it to the Plumbes. And it’s jolly unlikely that anybody ever would stumble across it accidentally. So all the Plumbes have to do is sit tight, wait till the heat’s off, and then start organizing themselves a nice winter cruise to the South Seas.”

“Mrs. Stephenson didn’t see them burying anything though, did she, dear?”

“They’d stop as soon as they heard a car coming. The trouble is, there’s no blooming cover up there. All they could do was hide the spade and the money—sit on it perhaps, or shove it under their coats—and try and look innocent. It was just their rotten luck that somebody drove past who actually knew them. And that the whole, apparently innocent happening came to my ears, of course,” said the Hon. Con, modestly giving credit where credit was due.

There was a short silence while the bedside clock ticked busily away.

Miss Jones sighed. “What are you going to do now, dear?”

The Hon. Con hunched her shoulders. “Ring the cops, I suppose.”

“At this time in the morning, dear?”

“I’m not likely to get a sympathetic hearing from that lot at any hour of the day or night,” whined the Hon. Con. “Talk about pea-green jealousy! I can just see their faces when they realize that, once again, I’m

half a dozen jumps ahead of 'em." She sagged back pathetically on her pillows. "I expect they'll send me away with a flea in my ear as usual. On the other hand"—she chose her words with care—"there is another way I could do it, one that wouldn't involve calling in the cops at all."

Miss Jones cheered up. Oh, yes—if only the Plumbes could be given a chance to repent and make reparation—

"I'll need your cooperation, Bones."

Miss Jones would have given her right arm to be of assistance in such a noble and humanitarian cause. "Of course, dear, anything."

"O.K.," said the Hon. Con, suddenly becoming all brisk and businesslike. "First thing after brekkers I want you to phone Stephanie Stephenson up and find out exactly where she saw the Plumbes sitting on Lutterworth Moor. You'll have to box it clever, Bones, because the last thing we want is to arouse her suspicions."

A faint whiff of doubt drifted into Miss Jones's mind but there were more practical difficulties to be settled first. "But what could I say, dear?" she protested weakly. "Surely she'll think the inquiry very odd, however carefully I phrase it. I hardly know Mrs. Stephenson. They're really your friends, Constance. Couldn't you ring her?"

The Hon. Con yawned and snuggled down in bed. "'Fraid I'll be otherwise engaged, old bean."

"Doing what, dear?"

The Hon. Con stretched out an arm and switched off her bedside lamp. "Organizing the loan of a pickaxe and a couple of stout shovels, of course, what else? Night, Bones, sleep tight."

She listened drowsily as Miss Jones groped her way with the tea tray to the bedroom door. She pulled the blankets up round her ears and sank into a warm glow of self-congratulation. Detection—that was her forte, all right. Putting two and two together, unraveling clues, working out problems—there was nothing to touch it. It was the most rewarding hobby a chap could possibly have.

And you could stuff taxidermy!

There were at least three possible motives for García's murder. . .

A KILLING AT EL CASTILLO

by
KENNETH
GAVRELL



A mile off the south coast of Puerto Rico there's a very small island—unnamed as far as I know—on which sits an old hotel called El Castillo. It doesn't look much like a castle, with its weathered wood, tiny balconies, and shuttered windows. I suppose it's called El Castillo because of the way it's perched, high and alone, on the steep-sided pile of rock which is the island.

Guests were motored out to the island on one of the hotel's launches.

It had a twenty-footer for this purpose and another, a sixteen-footer, for fishing. The hotel owner claimed there was good trolling for dolphins and barracuda in the area. When the sea was high and choppy, the ride out to the pile of rock was an adventure in itself.

El Castillo was an interesting example of self-sufficiency in a very interdependent age. It had its own electric generator, its own water and sanitation systems. The only thing needed from shore was gas in cylinders for the water heaters and stoves. Señor García, *el dueño*, was a man of all trades who took care of most of the maintenance and repairs himself.

I had spent the weekend there with a friend named Alma. We didn't try the fishing, but the view from our second-floor balcony was fine and the tranquility of El Castillo exactly what we wanted. We saw little of the other guests except at meals. Alma is a tall well endowed girl with long black hair and blacker eyes, and I experienced no little natural male vanity sitting across the table from her.

On Sunday afternoon we sunbathed on the rocks over a very calm sea. Señor García had allowed us to check out late and, after dinner, sun-weary and content, I went down to the office to pay the bill while Alma packed our bags. The office was below the stairs and connected with García's living quarters beyond through sliding doors. He was not behind the counter but the doors were open and I rang the desk bell.

A fly droned lazily through a slanting ray of sunlight. Cooking smells from the dining room hovered in the air. I could hear a clock ticking in the room beyond. I hit the bell again.

It looked as if he wasn't around. One of the help passed me on his way from the dining room and I asked where the owner was.

"As far as I know he's inside," he said.

I hit the bell a third time. The employee disappeared through a door. The fly continued droning and the clock ticking.

"Señor García!" I called.

I thought I heard noises back there—perhaps muffled voices. The more I listened, the more it sounded like voices. If I could hear them, they could certainly hear me. "Señor García!" I called again.

Now the muffled sounds seemed to stop. It was too quiet, and I didn't like it. I'm a private detective and have a melodramatic imagination. I walked around the counter and through the open doors into the living room. Beyond it was a hallway that led to the other rooms. I didn't feel I should penetrate farther and called again. Then I heard a door slam and

what sounded like faint noises from down the hall. I advanced rather tentatively. My curiosity is sometimes stronger than my good manners.

The hall was dimly lit. On my left I passed a bathroom and on my right a bedroom with a rumpled double bed. The noises seemed to come from straight ahead—the kitchen.

I walked to the kitchen door and entered. There was a movement to my right. I saw a shadowy figure. His face looked deranged. As I turned he fell heavily across my body, his arms around me, almost knocking me to the floor. Something sharp pressed painfully against my stomach. I managed to push him back, looked down, and saw the leather handle of a knife projecting from a rapidly expanding field of deep red. It was buried up to the hilt over his heart.

It took the boys from CIC a long time to arrive. They'd flown down by helicopter from San Juan. By then it was dark. There was the usual crew with their cameras and powder and measuring tape.

The lieutenant in charge was a guy called Romero. I knew him slightly, a middle-aged long-suffering type who'd lost his illusions years ago—including his illusions about solving most murders. He went through the motions very professionally, but he didn't like mysteries. He would do what had to be done and file it. His face was drawn, his hair was almost grey, and he chain-smoked.

Before the police arrived, I'd determined that the motive hadn't been robbery. No money had been taken. García had \$550 in his wallet and almost \$250 more in the counter drawer. I'd also learned that the hotel's sixteen-foot boat had been stolen a few minutes after I'd caught García in my arms. One of the help had seen the boat headed for shore with two men in it. By now I knew who the two men were: they'd been registered for the weekend in Room 9 on the second floor, a few doors down from my own. They'd given their names as Juan Ortiz Vega and José Muñiz Miranda, from Mayaguez. They'd said they were coming out to the hotel for a weekend's trolling. In fact, they had trolled the previous day without catching anything. One of the hotel people had checked the dock ashore to see if the sixteen-footer had put in there. It hadn't. The police would turn it up shortly, but I doubted we'd be seeing Señores Ortiz and Muñiz again.

"Two stabs in the heart and a third that just missed," Lieutenant Romero said to me.

"Professionals?"

"Any kid from a housing project can learn that much by the time he's fifteen."

"So what do you think?"

"Two men using a knife. They could be hired."

"Why a knife instead of a gun?"

"Why not? It's quieter." He lit one Winston off another and exhaled through his nose. "The help seem to be clean. They've suggested a few leads. García went to the track occasionally in San Juan, he was recently divorced, and he was in debt—no one admitted knowing how much. He'd also been seeing another man's wife on and off for the past year. And apparently the husband found out about it."

"Too easy," I said.

"Not easy to prove, if those two guys were hired."

"Did García have any family?"

"A daughter five years old and a widowed mother."

"So what's your itinerary?"

"Mother, ex-wife, girl friend's husband."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"What about your own girl friend?"

"I'll talk to her. She's got her car at the dock."

"Personally I think you're crazy, Bannon." He cast Alma, who was out in the hallway, an admiring glance. "Crazy."

"Don't tell me," Alma said. "Let me make a wild guess. You're not going back to San Juan with me."

"Well, it's just that I feel—"

"Oh, I know what you feel," she said hotly. "It's not the first time you've left me flat."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she said. "Try calling me when you get to San Juan, and see what happens."

She turned and stalked out, her lovely chin aimed somewhere toward the cold North Star.

Romero studied her rapidly receding back. "*Coño*," he said. "If I had as much curiosity as you I'd shoot myself."

"She'll come around," I said.

"I thought she was going to come around with a left hook."

"Let me know when you're ready to go," I said sourly.

We borrowed a squad car from Ponce. Romero put the phony names and the descriptions of the two suspects on the machine, remarking that it was most likely a waste of time, and then we drove to the mother's house on the outskirts of Ponce. It was almost eleven o'clock when we pulled up. The place was dark. It was a large house that had had its day of glory, but time and termites had worn it down. The expansive porch looked rickety and the walls were hidden under so many coats of white paint I was reminded of a badly made-up crone trying to hide her age.

We had to knock a while before a light came on and a female voice from behind the door asked who we were.

A tiled hall with hand-carved wood furnishings led into a very large living room with tall windows, filmy curtains, and sturdy ancient furniture. The light from a baroque fixture in the center of the ceiling was inadequate and yellowish.

Señora García resembled her house: old, proud, falling apart, but trying to keep up appearances. Her hair was greyish-red, her skin powder-white, and she wore a flowing silk bathrobe. She motioned us to sit. "What is this about my son?" she asked.

Romero started with the usual thing about an accident and then worked into serious accident and then into fatal. He didn't mention murder. I watched Señora García's face crumple. Tears tracked down the powder, and suddenly she became both ugly and pitiable.

In response to her broken questions, Romero gave the details, and her grief seemed to give way to something else. Anger? Resentment? Hatred? Romero monitored the change with as much interest as I did. When he finished speaking there was a moment of complete silence.

"Who do you think might have done it, Señora García? Do you recognize the descriptions of either of the two men?"

"No. My son had no enemies."

"Are you sure? I understand he was in debt."

"Everyone is in debt," she said.

"How did your son get along with his ex-wife?"

"You think those two assassins were hired?"

"It's possible."

"Yes, she might have done that. Now she will collect the insurance."

That made Romero lean forward. "What insurance?"

"Since Saul could not give her much just now for the child, he took out a life-insurance policy for her."

"What sort of policy?"

"I believe it is called decreasing term. It begins at fifty thousand dollars and decreases in value as the child gets older. The mother would administer the money until the child was eighteen."

"When did your son take out this policy?" I asked.

"A few months ago, just after the divorce."

"You think your former daughter-in-law would be capable of such a thing?" Romero asked.

"I never liked her," Señora García said. "She regards herself as a liberated woman. I have no use for liberated women. That is just a nice way of saying *puta*."

"Who else might have something to gain by your son's death?"

"I know of no one else," she said.

Then, in a roundabout way, Romero raised the question of whether García might have been murdered because of someone's jealousy. She became very angry at the question and denied the possibility. "We are an old family here in Ponce. In our veins runs the blood of the original Spanish settlers. The grandest parties in the city have been held in this house. At one time my father owned three carriages and half the farmland east of the city. But—" her voice dropped "—times have become harder for us." She wiped tears from her eyes. "Everything is different these days."

Romero rose to go. She led us out to the hall. Suddenly she asked to speak to me alone for a moment. I followed her back into the living room while the lieutenant waited outside.

"The policeman introduced you as a private detective. Why are you here?"

"I'm the one who found your son's body. It was just a coincidence."

"You are not working with the police?"

"No."

"Will you work for me?"

I didn't answer, the question caught me so unexpectedly.

"I don't have any confidence in the police," she went on. "They will never solve my son's murder. But you could devote your full time to it."

"I don't know. I've several other cases just now."

"How much would you charge?"

"I usually charge twenty-five dollars an hour."

Her face fell.

"If you want I'll look into it," I said. "I'll only charge you fifteen dollars an hour. I'll keep a record of my work hours—you'll have to trust me."

"Thank you," she said. "I like your face."

"I'll let you know as soon as I—or the police—turn up anything," I said.

"Thank you," she repeated and led me back to the hall.

"What was that about?" Romero asked in the car.

"She wants to hire me."

"Another vote of confidence for our department," he said tiredly.

"I won't take the job if you object," I said.

"I don't give a damn," he said. But I could see he did.

We drove to the address we'd been given for García's ex-wife, also in Ponce. She lived in an apartment complex near the expressway. Romero had a time trying to get her to open up via the intercom, but when he mentioned that her ex-husband was dead she let us in. We had to show her all our identification before she took the two chain locks off the door.

The former Señora García was a woman of about thirty. At twenty she'd have had a good figure and a handsome face; at thirty she was already tending to fat in the places typical of our island women—between the waist and the knees. She looked intelligent. She also looked tired.

"It's so late," she said. "What's happened?"

Romero told her in a less roundabout fashion than he'd used with the mother. She sat down on a cheap wrought-iron and plastic chair. The apartment was small and cramped, the furniture new but shoddy.

"Do you have any idea who might have done it?" the lieutenant asked her.

"No," she said.

"You're surprised, then?"

"Of course. It's horrible. Saul wasn't a bad man."

The descriptions of the two men at the hotel drew a blank.

"We think they might have been hired," Romero said.

She looked stunned.

"You've been divorced for several months," Romero prodded.

"Since June—no, July."

"Had you seen much of each other since?"

"No. He visited Mari—our daughter—sometimes."

"I understand he left her an insurance policy."

"Yes." Then she sensed his direction. "He volunteered to take out the policy since he couldn't help us much financially just now. The hotel has been having difficulties for some time."

"You work, Señora García?"

"I'm a receptionist for Dodds Brushes."

"Does it pay well?"

"Enough for the two of us. As you see, we don't live luxuriously."

"You mentioned the hotel's difficulties. How much in debt is it?"

"Thousands of dollars. I don't know exactly."

"To whom?"

"I think Saul borrowed most of the money from a man named Guiccioni. He's in business in San Juan."

"What sort of business?" I asked.

"Vending machines mostly, from what Saul said."

"Do you know how we can get in touch with him?" Romero asked.

"His company's in the phone book under Capri Vending Machines."

"Do you think he might have had your ex-husband killed?"

"No," she said. "Why in the world would he? I'm going to make some coffee. Will you have any?"

We declined.

"I might take a drink," Romero said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I haven't any liquor. I don't drink."

"You still got along well with your ex-husband?" Romero asked.

"As well as two people who've split up can be expected to get along," she said. "Saul said he would be able to help us once the hotel was back on its feet."

"Just one more question before we leave, Señora García. I'm afraid I have to ask it. Was your husband seeing another woman? A married woman?"

She looked confused. I could see the evasion coming. "Why do you ask that?"

"It would be better to tell us frankly," Romero said. "We'll find out about it eventually anyway."

"I—I think he was," she said.

"For about a year?"

She rose and walked into the kitchen. We could see her pulling out the coffee pot. She said something, but I couldn't catch it.

Romero got up and walked to the kitchen doorway. "What?"

"It started before the divorce," she said, her voice up a little. "I'm not sure if it was a whole year." She put water and coffee in the pot, her hands shaking slightly.

"Who was the woman, Señora García?"

"Her name is Diana Rivera de Otero. Her husband is Marcos Otero Soto. They're in the Coamo phonebook."

"Do you think Marcos Otero might have had your ex-husband murdered?"

"Oh, *I don't know*," she said. "*I don't know*. Would you please leave? I'm very tired. I'm spilling the coffee. *Please go*."

We went.

As the door closed behind us, I heard her start crying.

Romero wiped his forehead with a none-too-clean handkerchief. "Christ," he said. "To think I could have been a milkman."

We walked out to the car. "What now?" I asked.

"I've had it for one day," he said. "I wish I had a drink."

"So do I."

"Maybe we'll find a place open on the road. We'll be lucky to get to San Juan before two."

He radioed to ask if anything had come through on the machine about our two suspects. Nothing had.

"They're not professionals," he said. "That makes it nice. That makes it very nice."

We arrived in San Juan a little after two in the morning after stopping on the way for a drink, and I had two more in my apartment before I went to sleep.

I phoned my office at nine o'clock. Maria, my part-time secretary, said there was nothing particularly urgent—a couple of routine checks to be run on an accident case. I told her to ask Raul to do them.

"Are you coming in today?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I have to go down to Coamo."

"Another pleasure trip?"

"Business."

I rang off and dialed Alma's work number. They said she hadn't arrived yet.

Romero was waiting for me outside the main entrance of police headquarters in Hato Rey, a remarkably ugly building that looks very much like a prison. He had another detective with him I hadn't met before, a man named Vázquez. He seemed to be the strong, silent type; he was packing a gun under his coat.

"Let's check out the Guiccioni lead first," Romero said. "His office is down in Santurce."

It was on Ponce de León in a particularly grubby part of town on the edge of Miramar—a lettered door at the end of a dusty hall on the third floor of one of those buildings no sane woman would enter without company. Romero didn't bother to knock.

The door almost banged the desk as it swung back. Apparently Capri Vending Machines didn't believe in spending money on appearances. A heavy-set man in his mid-forties sat behind the desk speaking into one of two telephones. He eyed us inquisitively and hung up the phone. "What is this? You guys always walk in like this?"

Romero flipped his wallet open. The other detective stood with his hands behind his back looking strong and silent.

"What's up?" Guiccioni said, opening his hands as if to demonstrate that they were empty. He was nattily dressed in a shiny summer-weight suit that fit his chunky body well. His shirt and tie looked expensive. Two cigars peeped from the top of his breast pocket.

"Do you know a man named Saul García?"

"Yeah," Guiccioni said. "He's a business associate."

"You lent him some money?"

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"I don't see why I have to answer that."

"Would you rather answer it here or at headquarters?"

"What's this about?"

"García's dead. He was knifed yesterday."

"Oh, no, you don't," Guiccioni said.

"We just want you to answer some questions. If we like the answers we won't read you your rights."

"I lent him some money to pull his hotel out of difficulties."

"How did you meet him?"

"At the track about three years ago. In those days I went to the track a lot. Now I'm too busy."

"How much did you lend him?"

"Which time?"

"How many times were there?"

"Quite a few. I liked García. I guess altogether it comes to about twenty grand."

Romero sat down on the corner of the desk. "You must be a hell of a nice guy."

"It was a business deal," Guiccioni said.

"What was the rate of interest?"

"I'm not sure I have to answer that."

"You really do want to be booked, don't you? I checked your record: Two charges involving prostitution and one involving a suspected fix at the track. All three dropped for lack of sufficient evidence. You're a smart boy, Guiccioni—or else you have a good lawyer."

"I had nothing to do with this. Where was he knifed?"

"In his hotel."

"That's a million miles from here." Guiccioni shrugged. "I was in town all day and I can prove it."

"He was put away by two hoods. I'd guess they were hired for the job."

"Not by me," Guiccioni said. "Look, use your head: you don't kill a guy who owes you twenty thousand dollars. A dead man can't pay you a cent. As long as he's alive there's at least some hope of getting your money."

"That makes sense," Romero agreed. "But you're no charitable organization. What interest did you charge him?"

Guiccioni fumbled out a cigar and lit it from a desk lighter in the shape of a naked woman. He muttered some reply into his cigar.

"What was that?" Romero asked.

"Fifty percent," Guiccioni said. His voice, which had a hoarse quality, sounded a lot hoarser when he said it.

"Oh, that's very pretty," Romero said. "So he was into you for thirty thousand altogether."

"It gives me the best alibi in the world anyway," Guiccioni said. "I was the last guy who wanted to see García dead."

"Yeah, you're poorer by thirty thou," Romero said. "Breaks my heart, actually."

"I can afford it."

"Jukes and cigarette machines pay pretty well, eh?"

"Enough."

Romero swung off the desk. "You should get yourself a classier office. This place stinks."

"I'm not here all that much."

"Did García drop a lot at the races?" I asked Guiccioni.

"No, he was a small-time bettor. He did his big betting on his hotel. He really thought he'd pull it out. So did I, or I wouldn't have backed him. It was very successful once."

"Hell," Romero said, "you backed him for the fifty percent."

"He was a nice guy," Guiccioni said. "I'm sorry to hear he's gone."

Romero motioned us out and slammed the door behind us.

It took us an hour and a half to drive to Coamo, but with the new north-south expressway it's a pleasant ride right over the Cordillera Central. For me Puerto Rico is the mountains; I'll let the tourists have the seacoast. We arrived at lunchtime and had sandwiches at a corner *cafetería* while Romero asked directions to Otero's house.

"He's probably at work at this hour," I offered.

"We'll see."

It was a small frame house on a back street. The porch came right up to the road and two chickens squawked in the bare dirt yard beside the house. A young woman answered the door.

"Señora Otero?" Romero said.

She nodded behind the screen. He told her who we were and asked to be let in. She unlatched the screen door and backed off to let us through. She was dark and pretty, but not exceptionally so. Her print dress hung from a thinnish figure. When Romero explained why we were there, she started crying.

We waited uncomfortably. She dug her knuckles into her streaming eyes, and Romero lent her his handkerchief. When she'd let up a bit, he started in on her.

She wasn't very helpful. She said she'd stopped seeing García about a month before, after her husband had found out about them. Her husband had beat her up. She had no idea who could have killed García—it was

incredible. Romero's description of the two suspects from the hotel brought no response. Then he asked some insinuating questions about her husband.

She became very upset, told us we were talking crazy. Why would Marcos do it after she had definitely split with García?

"Maybe because of his honor?" Romero suggested.

She shook her head vigorously in denial. He wasn't capable of such a thing.

"Where's your husband now, Señora Otero?"

"At work. He works in the canning factory."

"Which one?"

"The only one. The fish factory. He won't be home till five."

"We'll go there," Romero said.

"Oh, *please* don't," she said. "I swear to you, Marcos had nothing to do with this."

"How do you know?" I asked.

She shook her head again—this time it seemed to be just a gesture of hopeless misery. "He'll be furious," she said.

"You mean he'll beat you again?" Romero asked.

"Oh, God," she said. "Oh, God. What a mess I've gotten us into."

The canning factory was on the south side of town. We had to pass a guard at the gate and wait in a visitors' room while they found Otero and brought him to us.

He came down the hall alone, a short muscular man in a loud shirt and jeans. He had a light complexion and fashionably long hair. He didn't look happy.

The other detective, Vázquez, pulled a pad from his pocket.

"Well?"

"Police," Romero said. "Homicide Squad."

"I don't get it."

"We're taking you down to the station."

"I don't like your sense of humor. What am I supposed to have done?"

"Murdered Saul García."

"You're crazy."

"Let's go," Romero said.

"You can't do this."

"I just did it," Romero said. "We know García was seeing your wife."

We know you found out about it and roughed up your wife. You're a perfect suspect, Otero, and we don't have any other right now."

"What about *evidence*?" Otero yelled. "You got any evidence?"

"We'll get the evidence," Romero said. "As for you, you'd better get a lawyer."

With that Romero pushed the shorter man toward the door.

Otero went berserk. He screamed and swung hard into Romero's stomach and then began flailing wildly at Vázquez. The latter jumped back and pulled his revolver. "Don't shoot!" Romero yelled. Otero swung at him again and then at me. I ducked the wild punch and kicked at his legs, missing. He ran for the door, but Romero was waiting and flattened him with one horrendous roundhouse blow across the neck. Otero went down choking. He writhed on the floor, unable to breathe. Blood began to show at the corners of his mouth. Romero kicked him very hard in the ribs and added another for good measure.

Otero took a long time to recover sufficiently to get to his knees. He looked docile enough now. "Resisting an officer," Romero said. "You stupid son of a bitch. Get to your feet. We're going to have quite a session."

They grilled him at the Coamo station for the rest of the day and through the night. I didn't stay for the whole show. I took a *guaguita* back to San Juan at four-thirty in the afternoon. Otero was right: the police didn't have a shred of hard evidence unless they could turn up the two guys from the hotel and make a connection. But all inquiries about those two guys had so far led nowhere.

I called Alma at home at six. She hung up when she heard my voice, so I went out to a lonely movie and hit the sheets early. At eight o'clock the next morning I phoned Homicide. Romero wasn't back from Coamo yet. I phoned again at ten from my office and they told me he was on his way. At lunchtime I got him.

"Did Otero crack?" I asked.

"No."

"Did you beat him up much?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Romero asked dryly.

"What *did* you get out of him?"

"He hated García enough to kill him. He admits it. But it looks like

he took it out on his wife instead. I don't think he's the kind who could commit a murder."

"He didn't have to commit it. He got two guys to do it for him."

"We worked that one hard," Romero said. "I'd say about four hours' worth. He just kept denying it. He convinced me."

"So you let him go."

"We talked to his wife again—she corroborated everything he said."

"Which leaves you where you started."

"Any suggestions?" Romero asked sarcastically.

"You still have one person with a wonderful motive: the ex-wife. That life insurance."

"It doesn't seem to wash," Romero said. "Everybody insists it was an unusually amicable divorce. No squabbling at all. They got along well afterward too."

"You know many divorces like that?"

"No, but it's not impossible," he said.

"Neither is a penguin in San Juan Bay."

"Where would she get the money to pay for the hit? You saw how she lives."

"Maybe she gave them an IOU," I said. "I'd suggest you keep a tail on her and another on Otero. That's about all you can do. There's no hurry about the ex-wife. Wait until she collects the insurance money and deposits it."

"How do you know she'll deposit it?" he said. "Maybe she'll buy a house."

"She'll deposit it," I said. "At least some of it. Then she'll wait a while. Call me when she makes the withdrawal."

"You were with me when I talked to that woman," Romero said. "Did she look to you like she'd murder her husband?"

"What does a murderer look like?"

"You're a bitter man, Bannon. O.K., I'll put the tail on her."

"And on Otero?"

"All right. I'll call you if anything breaks."

"Don't forget," I said.

"I won't," Romero said. "Why is it I get the feeling I'm doing your investigating for you? García's mother isn't paying *me* anything."

"The Commonwealth is. There's no point in my doing what you have to do anyway."

"True," he said. "Can I hang up and go back to work now, or was there something else you wanted?"

"No, that's all," I said.

He hung up and I called Señora García to give her a very unsatisfactory report on my progress with her son's murder.

Three weeks went by before Romero phoned me that García's ex-wife had collected the insurance money. She deposited it in the bank that same day—all of it. The tail on Otero was turning up nothing.

A month more went by before I received another call. "It looks like you may have been right, Bannon," Romero said. "She's been to the bank. She's arranged to withdraw ten thousand in cash two days from now. Hundred-dollar bills."

"This is it for sure, Romero. What time should I be at your office Wednesday morning?"

"The bank opens at nine-thirty."

"I'll be there at seven."

"Bring a gun."

He was ready to go when I arrived. We had a green unmarked surveillance car. "There'll be another car with two men in Ponce," Romero said. "They'll wait outside the bank. You and I will be outside her building. Everyone's armed."

We made Ponce before nine and parked down the block from the apartment-house parking lot. We were far enough away not to be noticed but still had a clear view of her car, a white Honda.

Romero had temporarily shelved some of his professional defeatism. "I haven't done this sort of thing for a long time," he said almost buoyantly.

He called the other car. They were already on their way to the bank. "Nothing to do now but wait," he said, lighting a cigarette.

I lit one too. We watched the Honda, the entrance of the apartment house. Several people went in and out, but not Señora García. An hour passed, then another. Romero chain-smoked.

"What the hell is she waiting for?" he said.

"You're sure the money's ready?"

"Of course it's ready. *Coño*, I'm jumpy."

"It'll do you good. You were beginning to atrophy."

By noon I was getting hungry. Still no Señora García.

"You're almost out of cigarettes," I remarked to Romero.

"I have two more packs in the glove box."

"What time does the bank close?"

"Two-thirty. She's got to make her move soon."

My body was stiff from sitting so long. By one o'clock, Romero was making inroads on his second pack of Winstons. At a quarter to two, Señora García appeared at the entrance.

"At last," he breathed.

She was dressed in brown slacks and a yellow blouse. From her shoulder hung a big brown purse. We watched her get into the Honda and swing it out of the lot. Romero started our car and tailed her at just the right distance. He called the other car to tell them she was on the way.

She headed toward the bank downtown, straight and sure as a compass needle. She parked just short of the entrance and Romero put us in a side street that had a view of the Honda.

The other car informed us they were farther down the main street. They'd seen her go in.

"Don't lose her," Romero said. "And don't move in until I tell you."

Ten minutes later she emerged. In addition to her purse she was now carrying a small brown paper bag. She looked around apprehensively as she walked to the car.

"She's afraid of purse snatchers," I said.

"Paper-bag snatchers," Romero corrected me. He started the motor and eased out into the traffic, two cars behind her. I saw the other surveillance car, a tan Dodge, pulling out.

"Now we'll get to meet our two mystery men," Romero said.

"Or at least one of them."

"There'll be two. Punks like that don't trust each other." The Honda swung a corner and we followed. "She seemed like such a nice girl," Romero said. "It's enough to make you a cynic."

We wended our way through town in the direction of the San Juan expressway. When we reached the expressway, she turned on. The tan Dodge was still with us.

"Where the hell is she going?" Romero said.

"Maybe the two punks live in San Juan."

"Then how would she know them? There's something wrong here."

"She may just be going a little out of town."

But she wasn't. She put the little Honda on sixty and held it there past

Juana Díaz, Coamo, Salinas. The only stops she made were at the toll booths. We headed into the mountains.

"It looks like San Juan," Romero said. "What about her kid? She's out of school by now."

"She must have arranged for the kid to stay with someone."

We passed Cayey, came down into the Caguas valley, continued north. It was three-thirty.

"There'll be only one man meeting her," I said. "We've been on the wrong track."

"Tell me about it," Romero said. "The drive's getting boring."

By four we'd reached the outskirts of Rio Piedras. The Honda left the expressway and continued north on the old Caguas road. Then we turned off onto Muños Rivera and a few blocks later right on Universidad. Just short of the entrance to the university she pulled into a side street and parked the Honda.

Romero continued past her. I looked back and saw that the Dodge was parking. We pulled to the curb half a block ahead. She was already out of the car.

"Let's go," Romero said. He gestured toward two guys across the street down near the corner. "Ours."

Señora García walked quickly. She looked nervous. She turned up Universidad, crossed Ponce de León, and entered the campus by the palm-lined main walk. She headed straight for the bell tower, wound her way through the open hallway beneath it, and came out on the quadrangle. Then she took a seat on a bench under a tree. The two guys from the Dodge were out of sight but I knew they had to be close. Romero and I split. He continued toward the theater and I cut off to the left. Soon I didn't see him.

The quadrangle was full of students and professors. It was a good place for what she was doing, but I didn't think she had chosen it. It was also good for us because of the crowd. But it wouldn't be too good if we had to do any shooting.

He came, ten minutes later, from the direction of the theater. He came cautiously, but moving directly for the bench on which she sat. I waited behind a pillar. We would make our move when he took the bag.

He seemed satisfied that nothing was amiss and approached the bench with more confidence. His shiny silver-grey suit gleamed in the sun as he sat down beside her. They talked for a minute and she passed him the

bag. I started running. Now I saw the others running too. We were converging on the bench from three directions. They saw us and both jumped to their feet. Guiccioni reached into his jacket.

I heard Romero, who was closer to him than I, yell something, but the gun came out, there were two loud reports, and Guiccioni staggered. People nearby started screaming. Some ran, others threw themselves to the ground. But it was already over. Guiccioni lay on his back in a pool of late-afternoon sunlight, the gun inches from his hand. He hadn't even gotten off a round.

He was dead before the ambulance arrived. Señora García was in quite a state. We got the whole story from her easily down at headquarters. It was substantially what I'd guessed during our long ride up from Ponce.

That evening after dinner, I drove back to Ponce to see García's mother. I wasn't at all in the mood for the drive, but she'd hired me and it was my job.

"So I was right," she said as I began my story. Her old painted facade glowed with perverse satisfaction.

"Not exactly," I said. "Your daughter-in-law didn't have your son murdered."

"What do you mean?"

"It was Guiccioni."

"What would be his motive?" she said.

"Thirty thousand dollars."

"But that makes no sense."

"Sure it does. Guiccioni would get his thirty thousand from your son's ex-wife after she collected the insurance money."

"Then they planned it together," she said, her face brightening once more.

"No, your daughter-in-law knew nothing about it. Your son had told Guiccioni about the life-insurance policy he'd taken out for his daughter. Guiccioni realized he'd probably never see his money while your son lived. The hotel was in too much trouble and getting deeper every day. So he hired the two killers. Then he waited for Señora García to receive the insurance money. He'd taken the trouble to make a friend in the insurance company. After she got the money he told her the truth. He scared the hell out of her, threatened to kill your granddaughter if she

didn't come across. After what he'd already done, she had every reason to believe him."

"I don't see how we can be sure all this is true," she said.

"In the state your daughter-in-law was in this afternoon, she wasn't likely to tell us any lies. Guiccioni was going to have her deliver the money in three well spaced installments. He thought that if she withdrew all thirty thousand at once someone might make the connection. Of course, to confirm all this completely we'd have to find the two hired killers. My guess is they took Guiccioni's money and hightailed it to New York."

"How will the police find them?"

"They won't, unless they're stupid enough to get picked up for another crime."

"Well, what do I owe you, Mr. Bannon?" she said baldly.

"Nothing."

"Don't be foolish," she said.

"Well, then, let's say two hundred dollars for two days' work. The police did most of it, actually."

"They couldn't have solved it without your help," she said.

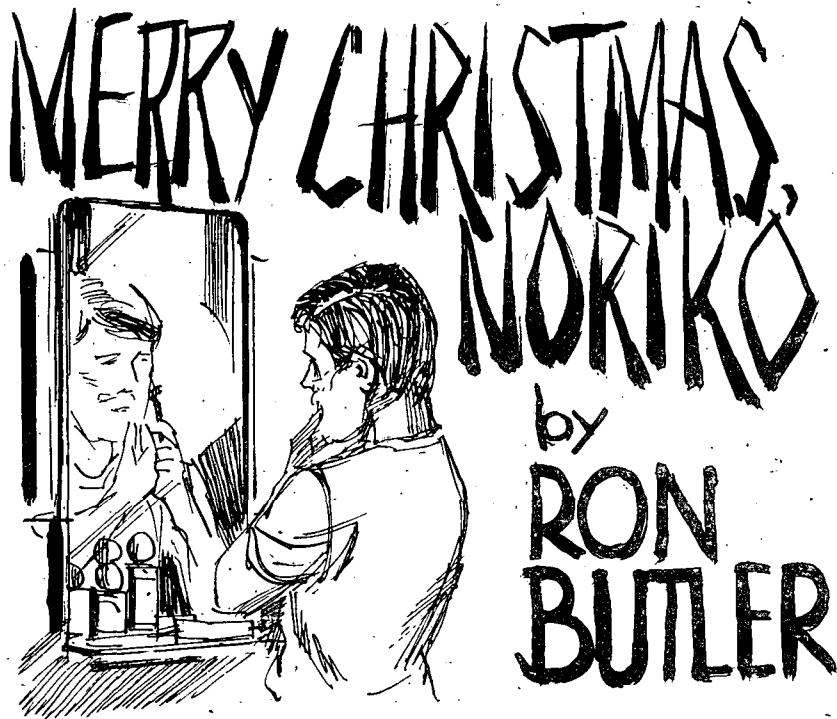
"Perhaps, but I got them to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. You see, your remarks about your daughter-in-law prejudiced my thinking. It wasn't hard. I'm a divorced man, and it was easy for me to believe she wasn't what she appeared. It's not a good idea to let your personal feelings cloud your thinking in my business."

"We may yet discover she was involved," the mother said.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

The March 3 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale February 4.

"A policeman makes enemies," Ueki said . . .



MERRY CHRISTMAS, NORIKO

by
**RON
BUTLER**

For a time in that joyous season that rings out the cares of the world, Emma-O, the King of Hell, seemed to reign on earth. Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki and I had reason to believe that one of his fiends had been sent to stalk us personally.

That winter had been a busy—and successful—one for me. Our computer hardware business had been so brisk that the company moved us to new more spacious facilities in downtown Okayama. And I had been

promoted from manager to director of all of our operations in Japan. It meant more money, which my wife Noriko appreciated—however, it also made increasing demands on my time.

The end of the year, therefore, had special appeal for me. I anticipated with pleasure the exotic Christmas season in Japan, and the gradual slowing of life's pace as the people readied themselves for the new year, when the bells of the Buddhist temples would peal a hundred and eight times, once for each of the major concerns of human life.

A week before Christmas we had our company *bonenkai*, the traditional end-of-the-year party, and I then gave our employees formal (and cheerful) permission to leave work until the third of January. It was not unusual; there are many preparations that must be made for *shinnen*, the new year. Homes must be cleaned thoroughly, decorations put up, and gifts purchased for friends, relatives, and people where one works. It is the time to pay debts, cast off worries, and resolve to improve one's self and one's fortunes.

At home I helped Noriko scrub the tiles of the bath, clean the hardwood floors in the kitchen and family room, and vacuum the tatami mats. It was a source of love for me to work alongside her, to watch her delicate precise movements as she went from room to room, graceful and laughing at my clumsy efforts to help.

Noriko's parents—Inspector Ueki and his wife, Hanako—came to our house to help us place the *kadomatsu* at each side of the front entrance. The branches of pine, plum, and bamboo, which are hardy plants, symbolize long life. Above the sliding glass entrance door we would place the *shimekazari*, a knotted straw rope decorated with daidai, a bitter orange. *Daidai* also is a phrase meaning "from generation to generation," and all of us were thinking of the baby Noriko would soon bring into the world. Around the *daidai* were fern leaves, symbols of expanding prosperity.

After the decorations were up, Inspector Ueki and I decided to pay a visit to a mutual friend, Henri Saboreaud. Henri was an artist of considerable talent who had come to Japan ten years ago, fallen in love with a young Japanese art student, and remained. A year ago, the French artist's wife had died of tuberculosis and Henri was left with his terrible grief and the task of raising Jules, his five-year-old son, alone. I had met him at one of his exhibits, and we had become friends. Ueki later had pur-

chased several of Henri's watercolors, pleased with the Meiji-period style Henri had mastered.

Ueki offered to take his car and we left the women to discuss the mystery of babies and to prepare *mochi*, the rice cakes we would place on a small wood stand in the *tokonoma* alcove for the new year.

Inspector Ueki slid open the door and we stepped into the entranceway. "*Gomen kudasai!*" he called out. Excuse us, please! Little Jules ran into the hallway, followed by his father.

"Sam Brent and Inspector Ueki! It is so nice of you to pay me a call! Come in, come in! May I offer you some refreshments?"

"No thanks, Henry," I said. "We'll be staying only a minute. Do you and Jules have plans for Christmas?"

"No. We will have a small dinner, then open our presents—if I have time to go shopping. I regret the season does not mean as much as when my wife was alive."

"Saboreaud-san," Ueki said, "my wife and I are having a Christmas dinner for Sam this year, and there will be more than enough for you and Jules. Will you please honor our home with your presence? Hanako is preparing *shichimencho*."

"Ah, turkey." The painter smiled. "Jules and I would like that very much. Yes, thank you, we will come."

"Excellent!" Ueki beamed. "And if you require help in shopping for presents please feel free to call on us."

Saboreaud pulled at his long greying beard. "Help is something I may need. There is little time left and I must go to an exhibit in Kobe tomorrow."

"Any chance that you're taking the eleven-twenty?" I asked.

"Why, yes. Do you mean to tell me you will be traveling at the same time?"

"Yes." I laughed. "Inspector Ueki's department is playing host to some visiting policemen from Hawaii and he's taking one of them to show him Kobe's training program for special communications. I'm tagging along for the fun of it. Is Jules going with you?"

"Naturally. He is reluctant to let me out of his sight."

"Then," Ueki suggested, "why not meet at the station? We can sit together."

"That would be enjoyable," Saboreaud said. . . .

The Okayama Station, like all train stations in Japan, was crowded. Tour groups obediently followed their guides, high school students milled about, and clusters of businessmen thronged up and down the escalators and stairs to the various platforms for the local trains and the incredibly fast Shinkansen bullet trains. I had been standing outside of the ticket-purchasing area for several minutes when I caught sight of Saboreaud, holding Jules by the hand. The boy ran to me and I swooped him up for his accustomed hug.

"Good morning, Henri," I said, "Ueki should be here any minute." I bounced Jules on my shoulders while Saboreaud purchased his tickets, then saw the inspector approaching with another man just as Ueki sauntered back from a ticket window.

"You must be Sam Brent," the husky Japanese-American said. "And I assume that this is Mr. Saboreaud and Jules. I'm Ted Enoki. Inspector Ueki has told me a lot about all of you."

"Nice of him," I said. "How are you enjoying your visit to Japan, Mr. Enoki?"

"Great so far. We can learn a lot from police procedure over here."

Ueki joined us and we rode an escalator to our platform. The train was on time and we stood back as the Okayama-bound passengers disembarked, then pressed our way aboard with several hundred other people.

Jules said he was hungry, so I suggested a snack. We swayed and lurched our way to Car Number Eight, the restaurant, as the train accelerated rapidly. The five of us seated ourselves at a table toward the rear of the car. A green-clad serving girl came quickly for our orders.

Enoki made a selection from the menu, spoke in good Japanese, and lit a cigarette.

I was impressed. "Where did you learn the language?"

"In Honolulu." He grinned. "I thought it would be a plus for promotion on the HPD because we have so many Japanese tourists. Now and then they need help."

He took a sip of his coffee. "My parents kind of encouraged me. They're second generation and have forgotten a lot of their own Japanese. They like to hear me speak it."

"It took me a long time to learn it," I said, remembering the many difficulties and embarrassments I suffered when I first arrived. "Anyway, Hawaii is lovely. You're lucky to live there."

"You've visited?"

"Several times."

"Well," Enoki smiled, "the next time you get there look me up. I'm still a bachelor and my detective's pay lets me get around to a few nice spots." He took out a notebook and wrote down his name and address. I glanced up and saw Jules returning from a trip to the bathroom. Enoki waved for him to come finish his soft drink.

Ueki tapped a cigarette out of a pack. "Japan does not confuse you, Enoki-san?"

"Not me," Enoki boasted. "I figure I can speak the language as well as most people and I've read enough about the customs so that I'd feel safe working here undercover if I had to."

Ueki looked at the younger man with amusement. "You would never pass for Japanese, Enoki-san."

The detective frowned. "Why not?"

"Allow me to make some friendly observations. Your trousers are perfectly creased at the knees. We Japanese, however, sit crosslegged so often that our trousers tend to be baggy. Also, when you struck a match to light your cigarette you drew the match toward you, not away as we do." Ueki finished his beer. "Further, when you wrote your address for us you wrote it backward in terms of how we do it. A Japanese would write, in order, his country first, then city, ward, district, house number, and name."

Enoki's frown deepened. "Inspector, don't you think that's nitpicking?"

Ueki fixed the detective with his jet-black eyes. "I might also add that when you beckoned for young Jules to return to his seat, it was a non-Japanese gesture. When we beckon, we wave the hand, palm down, toward the person we want."

Saboreaud, enjoying the exchange, joined in. "He is right, Enoki-san. Now if you will humor me, please use your fingers and count off each item of 'nitpicking.'"

Enoki raised a thumb. "O.K. My trousers." He thought for a moment, then raised another finger. "Matches. Addresses. Beckoning. That's all I remember." Four of his fingers were extended.

"Another fatal flaw in your undercover attempt," Ueki laughed.

"I don't believe it! How?"

"When we count with our fingers," Ueki explained, "we stretch all of them out to start, then bend them down one at a time as we enumerate items. Do you still think you can pass for a native Japanese?"

Enoki smiled sheepishly. "Well, give me a few more days."

The trip was beneficial for all of us. The Kobe police superintendent expressed interest in examining my company's bilingual computer print-out system for the police communications network and Saboreaud made several profitable sales at the exhibition.

The following day we met at the Kobe Station, found good positions on the platform, and scrambled aboard first in order to get adjacent seats in the non-reserved section. Jules sat in my lap, watching the towns and farms rush by, and we chatted casually until the train chimes signaled our approach to Okayama.

Ueki and Saboreaud stood up first as the Shinkansen began braking for its stop. The platform was inching by outside the window and, as we stopped with a mild jolt, there was the unmistakable crack of a handgun.

Saboreaud, crying out with pain, fell to the floor.

Ueki and Enoki struggled to push their way through a mass of passengers in the aisle, many of them screaming or shouting in the confusion. Jules, his face pale, watched with wide eyes as I bent over Saboreaud. He was bleeding and unconscious, but I was certain that the wound—toward the outside of his right shoulder—was not fatal.

Ueki, revolver drawn, finally reached the platform, looked about helplessly for a moment, then yelled orders to one of the conductors, flashing his police identification.

Enoki waited on the platform while Ueki pushed his way back into the train, shoving people aside as he ran to us.

"*Mada ikite imasuka?*" Is he still alive?

"Yes, but he needs an ambulance! Soon! I can't stop the bleeding!"

"It is on the way, Sam. Here, Jules, let Uncle Toshihiko hold you. Papa will be all right."

When we left Henri Saboreaud's hospital room, he was out of danger and resting comfortably. Noriko insisted on taking Jules home with us, and the boy, after some reassuring words from his father, had not objected. He asked, "Will Papa be home for Christmas?" Noriko, holding him close, promised that the doctors would do their best.

Enoki accompanied us back to our house. Noriko bathed Jules and unrolled a *futon* for him. The child curled up in the quilted floor bedding and fell asleep.

The four of us sat around the kitchen table, drinking coffee. Ueki was unusually quiet.

"What are you thinking, Toshihiko?" I asked.

"*Okotte imasu*," he muttered. I am angry.

"Because the person who shot Henri got away?"

"Many reasons, Sam. This is extremely unusual. No civilian is allowed to own handguns, and there is no reason why anyone should want to harm an artist like Saboreaud-san. The conclusion is inescapable."

Enoki nodded his head. "My guess is that someone was after you or Mr. Brent, Inspector."

"Exactly so," Ueki agreed. "To narrow the matter even further, it is more likely that the shot was intended for me."

Noriko put her hand on Ueki's arm. "But why, Father?"

"A policeman makes enemies. It is unavoidable."

Even so, I thought, it would require a special form of hatred to risk using a handgun. Only the most professional of Japanese criminals had access to them, smuggled in from different parts of the world.

Enoki refilled his coffee cup. "Assuming that someone's out to get you, Inspector, how'd he know you'd be on that train?"

Ueki smiled wryly. "I believe I am being stalked, Enoki-san."

The American detective looked at Ueki thoughtfully. "You mentioned the law against owning handguns. Have you ever been involved in weapons violation cases before?"

Ueki and I stared at each other for a moment. "Yes. Sam and I once trailed a man to Hawaii and found he was smuggling both guns and drugs with the help of an accomplice in Honolulu and two airline stewardesses."

Enoki lit another cigarette.

"I remember that case," he said. "I just hadn't linked it with your names. Some guy got wise to the fact that you were following him back to Japan on the same airplane and shot out a window. He was blown out of the plane by the decompression and some other fellow tried to block the opening with his body."

"His name," Ueki said grimly, "was Masaharu Kono. One of my best friends, Tetsuo Akiyama, gave his life trying to save the other passengers."

"If I were you," Enoki said, "I'd follow up from there. Did this Kono have any friends or associates who would come out in the open with a handgun for revenge?"

"The night is still young," Ueki said. "Shall we go ask some questions?"

Noriko asked us to be careful. I assured her that we would:

Ueki drove to his home first. "I wish to pick up my revolver," he said. "I left it home when I changed clothes. Also, in view of our destination, it would be advisable for us to call a taxi. It may be necessary for us to have a few drinks during our inquiries."

"What," Enoki asked, "have you got in mind?"

"We will ask questions at some of the Okayama nightclubs. My men have reported rumors that a few of them are selling drugs to special customers again. Kono used to supply them."

Enoki appeared to be puzzled. "Would they talk to you? I mean, the ones who know you're a cop?"

"The police of many countries, as you know, operate under the principle that it is better to let the small fish escape in order to catch the larger ones. Like you, we make use of informants who have knowledge of criminal activities but whose own involvement is peripheral."

Mrs. Ueki, accustomed to the inspector's activities, did not ask where we were going, although I noticed the slight betrayal of concern on her face as Ueki attached his belt holster.

There is an entire section in downtown Okayama and most other large Japanese cities where east parts from west and where the ancient ways of the Orient operate unknown to most western eyes. Here politeness vanishes—the laughter is raucous and men come to get drunk, to ogle scantily-clad women, to dance and carouse under garish lights and deafening music.

Even by Japanese standards prices are exorbitant in the nightclubs. Tough-looking club attendants stop by each table after the obligatory drinks are served. They collect, guard against deadbeats, and keep the customers under control.

The first club we went to was so noisy we didn't attempt to talk. The thick, motionless fog of cigarette smoke nauseated me and I resented the demand for the equivalent of thirty dollars for three bottles of beer.

Enoki watched in astonishment as the next "show" began. Six relatively young women, all grinning hugely, removed their tops and began a giggling, grinding dance to the blaring music, looking (to my conservative eyes) like so many overgrown kids kicking up their heels in a sandbox. After the show several of them came to our table and sat with us, flirting,

teasing, suggestive. Enoki gaped and gawked, lost in the rapid colloquial Japanese. One of the women sat next to Ueki. When she recognized his face, her smile disappeared. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the inspector gestured that it was time to leave after a few minutes of talking to her.

Outside, he lit a cigarette. "She could not tell me much, but it was worthwhile. It seems that Masaharu Kono has a son, Masahide, who now operates one of the larger clubs. She does not know if he is involved in drugs or guns, but he holds an important position in one of Okayama's criminal organizations. I would like to visit his club next, if you do not object."

Kono's club was packed with revelers. We had just walked in when two men came up to us. "I am sorry, gentlemen," one of them said, looking at me, "but we have a policy against allowing foreigners in here for fear of corrupting them."

I didn't like the sneer in his voice and replied with mock politeness. "*Sumimasen. Boku wa nihonjin desu.*" Excuse me. I'm Japanese. I used the humblest first-person pronoun for men in the language.

Enoki grinned. "And I'm the foreigner."

The two men made a move for us. Enoki dropped one of them with a toe kick to the chin. Ueki chopped the other one across the throat lightly with the edge of his hand, then leaned down and held his identification card in front of the man who had spoken to us.

"You will now take us to the owner's office."

Wiping blood from his chin, the man stood up shakily and stammered that the owner wasn't present.

"Where is he? Answer quickly!"

"He has gone to the hot spring at Kusatsu."

"Why?"

The man seemed to hesitate and Ueki grasped him by the throat, squeezing slowly.

"Please! He has some kind of skin rash—an allergy of some sort—and his doctor advised the waters of the spring!"

Ueki released him. "Very well. There is a Korean woman working here. Her name is Lee and I want you to take us to Kono's office and bring her to me immediately." The man started to say something, changed his mind, and complied.

Kono's office was furnished sparsely with a large polished hardwood desk and two black vinyl-covered sofas. In a few minutes the Korean woman entered the office, bowed, and stood before us. Ueki asked her to take a seat on one of the sofas. I noticed that she was extremely nervous, looking over her shoulder repeatedly toward the closed door. "This is dangerous for me, Inspector Ueki."

"I know. I have only a few questions. What do you know of the owner of this club, Masahide Kono?"

She lowered her head and spoke softly. "I have heard it said by the others who work here that he has sworn to kill you and your foreign friend as a matter of honor to avenge his father's death." So I was included too.

Ueki's face was expressionless. "Why did you not report this to me? When you were having problems with Immigration I intervened and made it possible for you to remain in Japan."

Tears filled her eyes. "Inspector, Kono-san has said he will destroy anyone who attempts to interfere."

"I thought as much," Ueki said. "One other question. Do you know if Kono is involved with drugs or guns?"

She looked at Ueki hopefully. "Can you offer me protection?"

"You will leave here with us, and I will arrange to find you a job in another city where you are not known."

She stood up. "I have seen some of the regular customers purchase drugs from the attendants. I do not know about the guns."

"*Wakgrimashita.*" Understood. "Please come with us now. I am afraid that we have much to do."

In the morning we checked on Saboreaud. He would, the doctors said, be discharged in time for Christmas. Inspector Ueki received permission to search for Masahide Kono and worked out arrangements with the police in Gumma Prefecture; the location of the Kusatsu hot springs. Ueki was able to obtain copies of Kono's passport photos.

There was a problem insofar as my own participation was concerned. As on past occasions, I wanted to be with Ueki for the resolution of the situation, but Christmas was drawing near and, if possible, I preferred to spend it with Noriko.

Enoki and I were sitting in Ueki's office when I thought of something. "Toshihiko, if we fly to Gumma Prefecture we may be able to get back in time for that turkey dinner Hanako is planning."

The inspector propped his long legs on his desk top. "True, Sam, but my superiors approved funds for train travel only. If I process another request it may take several days."

I smiled. "You once told me that good friends are better than cash in the bank."

"If you are offering to pay for air fare I must tell you that it will be expensive. You see, I also have arranged for Detective Enoki to make the trip."

"You know Goto-san, my chief clerk, don't you?"

"Yes. A most pleasant young man."

"He has his private pilot's license. Why don't I give him a call and see if he'll fly us there and back?"

"*Daijobu!*" O.K.!

Goto was all willingness. Aside from the fact that I was his boss, he was engaged to one of Noriko's friends and had been to our home several times.

We met at the Okayama Airport and Goto led us to the plane he had rented, a twin-engine Mitsubishi. We placed our light shoulder bags in the luggage compartment and climbed in. Goto contacted ground control and was directed to an exit ramp. He then called the tower and was told to taxi to runway three-six. After a brief wait, we received clearance and Goto soon had us airborne.

Because of the extremely mountainous terrain, flying in Japan can be bumpy, but it was a cold clear day and the air was dense and still. Goto had selected a small airfield near the hot springs. It was not busy enough for radio communications, and I watched with admiration as Goto put the Mitsubishi in a graceful turn, checking for other traffic, then brought us in for a smooth touchdown. Enoki, always anxious to practice his Japanese, went to a pay phone and called a taxi. Ueki then called his local counterparts and arranged a meeting.

The afternoon sun was pleasant and a large number of bathers was present at the springs. We split up, looking around for Kono without success. Two officers from Gumma Prefecture arrived at the designated spot and they showed Kono's photographs to several people at the concession stands, also without luck. The officers said they had obtained no

information during the inquiries they made before we came to the springs. Ueki promised to stay in touch, and they returned to their normal duties.

"What next?" Enoki asked.

Goto, bowing deeply, said we might as well enjoy the hot water. We were willing, but Ueki warned us that the water temperature ranged from a hundred and twenty to a hundred and thirty degrees Fahrenheit. "Be certain you follow directions," he cautioned.

We went to an enclosed area with a huge wooden tub which could hold more than fifty bathers. Provided with loin cloths, we waited until the bath-master appeared. Along with about thirty other people, we picked up long boards and stirred the water to reduce its temperature.

At the bath-master's command, we entered carefully. It was like stepping into molten lava. We were instructed to remain absolutely still; any motion would make the steaming water unbearable. Every minute the bath-master called out how much longer we were to remain—three or four minutes being the limit—and the bathers answered in chorus.

I had begun to surrender to the experience—knowing that less than two minutes were left—when Enoki shouted out. We saw the man walk up to the tub, smiling, an automatic in his hand. Masahide Kono. I tried to move and was licked by eddies of liquid fire. Ueki's face, drenched with perspiration, was contorted with determination as he tried to make his way to the edge of the tub.

The other bathers looked on in stunned disbelief as Kono raised his arm slowly and fired a split-second after Ueki ducked under the water. Then he turned the weapon toward me. I watched as the bath-master swung one of the long boards at Kono, who stepped aside deftly and shot at him. Kono then emptied the automatic in our direction and fled to a car waiting outside. Ueki's face, the hue of a cooked lobster, appeared above the water and we helped him out.

The bath-master would be in the hospital for a long time, but no one else had been hit. Ueki's skin would blister. "Kono is long gone by now, Inspector Ueki, so I'd recommend you get some medical attention and rest for a while," Enoki said.

Ueki surprised me by agreeing. The pain must have been profound. Goto called a taxi, which took us to a Japanese-style hotel near the springs.

I rushed to the front desk and told the clerk that we needed a doctor. He asked what was wrong, and I explained.

"There are many patrons of the springs who complain of tender skin from the heat," he said, "and our masseuse has some special salves which are effective. Shall I call her?"

"Please," Ueki said from behind me. I went to Ueki's room with him, then returned to help check in the others. I paid for four rooms, deciding that the luxury of privacy was deserved.

Goto went to clean up, and I accompanied Enoki to his room. I slid open the paper-paneled door and Enoki looked about in mild confusion. The only furniture was a television set and a short-legged table. I showed him where he would find a padded winter kimono, then opened a closet that contained the sleeping quilts and the small hard pillows the Japanese prefer to the softer western variety.

"Where," Enoki asked, "do you sit?"

I pointed to the *zabuton* cushions on the tatami mats. "It's clean, it's inexpensive, and you get two meals with it. Sitting on the floor is a minor inconvenience. Right?"

"Right." He smiled. "Someday when you get back to Honolulu I'm going to repay you for all this kindness."

I was shaving when Goto opened my door.

"Ah, Bulentu-san." (Few Japanese pronounce Brent the way my parents intended.) "I have talked to the hotel masseuse. She says Inspector Ueki is no longer in pain and will suffer no ill effects."

"Great, Goto-san! Ueki probably wants to rest, so why don't we get Detective Enoki and see if we can find a drink?"

"I had hoped very much that you would say that."

We found Enoki squirming about on one of the floor cushions, watching a *sumo* match on television. He was ready to go with us. "I could use a drink," he said. "That was one hell of an experience we had today. It's a wonder Kono didn't get all of us."

"He might have," Goto remarked, "if the bath-master had not tried to stop him."

"That's true," I said. "Before we leave, we'll have to express our thanks to him personally, and I'll check to see if his family needs any extra money while he's in the hospital. Where can we go for that drink, Goto-san?"

"No Japanese resort area," he replied, "is without a place for thirsty travelers. Please allow me to show the way."

There was a bar near the hotel, and we entered. Enoki commented on

the beauty of the two young women behind the bar. "Barmaids," Goto laughed, "are much more common in Japan than male bartenders. We men like to be pampered."

Enoki ordered *wheeskey mizuware*, whiskey highballs. He sipped from his glass and scowled. "This is scotch."

I tried to suppress a smile. "If you want bourbon whiskey, you have to ask for *babon wheeskey*, and a lot of bars don't stock it. To the Japanese, whiskey means scotch."

"Anyway," Enoki said, "this is a fun way to learn." We finished our drinks and returned to the hotel. I said goodnight to Goto and Enoki and started to enter my room, then thought I'd better see how Ueki felt.

I opened the door to his room. Masahide Kono glared at me triumphantly. The gun was pointed at my stomach.

Inspector Ueki and I were bound together, back to back, by a length of rope. Kono and an accomplice, a short bowlegged man named Katakura, sat crosslegged at the table, drinking *shochu*, a potent drink much like vodka. Kono's automatic, a Belgian Browning .380, lay on the table before him.

"So," he hissed, "at last I have both of you. Tonight, you may be assured, is your last."

Calmly, Ueki asked, "I am able to understand your hatred for me, but why must you also involve Sam Brent?"

"Because," Kono snarled, "this red-haired scum was with you when you caused my father's death. Therefore, he dies with you."

"That is not accurate," Ueki tried to reason. "Masaharu Kono caused his own death by shooting the window out of a jetliner at high altitude."

Kono got up, standing over us menacingly. "It was because of you and this foreigner that he chose a heroic death."

"I would argue," Ueki said, "that your father died in disgrace, a man who violated our laws by bringing guns and drugs into Japan."

Kono shrugged, sat down, and poured another glass of *shochu*. "I will not waste my time talking to corpses. You will be pleased to know that I have chosen a fitting death for you."

"The police know we're here," I said.

Kono snorted. "So they do. But they do not know that I am here with you. In fact, I deliberately left word that I would be at the springs, knowing that you would follow."

My thoughts turned to Noriko. It was doubly cruel, I felt, to die so senselessly in what was supposed to be a season of hope. I didn't want to think of the baby who would have no father. If there was any solace, it was the knowledge that I would spend my last moments with a man of courage, a person I admired and respected above all others.

The *shochu* bottle was empty. Kono barked an order to Katakura, who opened the door and disappeared down the corridor. When he returned he was carrying a white sixteen-liter plastic container of *toyu*, the kerosene used to fuel the space heaters found in so many Japanese homes and businesses.

"No!" I protested. "There are many guests in the hotel! No sane man would do anything like that!"

Kono laughed. "It is too late for insults. I regard myself as a hero like my father, unafraid to confront my enemies, and strong enough of heart and mind to send them to the kind of death they deserve."

Ueki strained against the bonds. "What of the innocent lives you will destroy along with us?"

"That," Kono said, "is their fate, not mine."

He unscrewed the cap on the *toyu* container and removed a book of matches from his pocket.

I felt Ueki's muscles continue to strain. Kono started to tilt the container over, and Enoki crashed through the flimsy door holding a revolver.

"Move and die!" he shouted. Kono and Katakura backed away slowly. Enoki, keeping them covered, bent down and untied the tope. Ueki and I stood up with Kono and Katakura watched sullenly.

"You will come with us," Ueki commanded, still calm.

"No!" Kono screamed. He kicked over the container and the liquid soaked into the straw mat.

"Freeze or I'll fire!" Enoki warned, steadying the revolver on his wrist.

Kono dropped to the floor and Enoki froze, afraid to shoot because of the hazard. Kono quickly struck a paper match and held it over the reeking mat. "If my life is over, so is yours." He dropped the match.

We crashed through the tattered remnants of the door as the flames spread with a whooshing sound.

"The other guests!" Ueki shouted. "Warn them!"

We ran through the halls, yelling, sliding doors open, telling the other occupants to get out. By the time everyone had left the hotel, it was

engulfed in flames. Propane storage tanks began exploding in the kitchen area, and even from a distance of fifty meters the heat was hellish.

"Kono and Katakura didn't have a chance, did they?" Enoki mused.

"More than they were going to give us," Ueki said.

No argument.

On the day before Christmas, Henri Saboreaud returned to his home. "I feel much better," Henri said, "but not quite strong enough to do any shopping yet. I regret that Jules will have to wait a few days."

"I am certain," Noriko told him, "that having you home again is the best present for your son."

Saboreaud smiled sadly. "I will try to make it up to him next year."

While I sat in the family room with Ueki and Enoki, Noriko prepared eggnog.

"Tasty," Enoki said. "I'll drink to Christmas first and then to getting out of that little scrape at the hot springs."

"Speaking of scrapes," Ueki said, "I must inform you that you broke the law by bringing your revolver into the country."

Enoki put his glass down, incredulous. "But I'm a policeman too."

Ueki's eyes sparkled. "Nevertheless, Enoki-san, it was an illegal act. This time, however, I will overlook the matter. When I last saw that revolver it was in Gumma Prefecture, out of my jurisdiction. I trust that your weapon will return to Honolulu without further incident. And I am certain that Sam wishes to join me in thanking you for saving our lives."

Enoki shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever understand the Japanese. But Merry Christmas anyway. I've forgotten how you say it in Japanese."

"*Kurisumasu o-medeto*," Noriko told him.

Enoki smiled. "I like the way it sounds. *Kurisumasu o-medeto*."

We finished our eggnog and were making small talk when Noriko changed the content of our conversation.

"Sam, it is so sad that little Jules Saboreaud will not have his Christmas presents on time. Perhaps it would make the child happy if you and my father could go shopping for some gifts."

"My thoughts," Ueki confessed, "have been similar. Will all of you please go with me?"

Ueki left us in the toy section of the Takashimaya department store for

a brief mission of his own. We walked around, looking at toys and admiring the tree decorations and the motifs with elves and reindeer. The music system was playing a famous carol sung by Bing Crosby. There are relatively few Christians in Japan but the season has been adopted wholeheartedly. It is a time of greetings and giftgiving.

When Ueki returned, he was carrying a large parcel and a shopping bag. "Come," he said, "we have a mission."

So, on that crisp Christmas eve, we crowded into our car and Noriko drove us to the Saboreaud home.

"Please wait," Ueki said. He got out, opened the trunk, and disappeared into the garden. Minutes later we heard the entranceway door slide open, followed by a child's shrieks of delight.

The moon was full and we watched as the tall man with a full white beard and red suit emerged. "Ho! Ho!" he chuckled. Behind him stood an open-mouthed artist with his arm around a smiling boy with wrapped presents in his hands.

Noriko put her hand on my cheek. "Somehow it does not seem so strange to see my father as Santa Claus."

Why not? I thought. Why not indeed?

"Merry Christmas, Noriko."

"Yes, Sam. *Kurisumasu o-medeto.*"

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Seventeen thousand fans were restless . . .

BAD TIMES

by
**GARY
ALEXANDER**



I was sitting in the Kingdome press box, drumming nervously on my typewriter keys, occasionally thwacking the blank sheet of paper. There wasn't anything else to do. It was seven minutes after eight, the National Anthem had been played, and the Blitzers still hadn't taken the floor for their game against Seattle. Down below, a buzz was fast becoming a roar; seventeen thousand natives were restless. I didn't blame them. They hadn't paid ten bucks a crack or so to stare at empty hardwood.

Arnie Farber ran in, huffing and puffing, and sat down beside me. "I scouted the locker room, Dave. They haven't shown, and Gate Security hasn't seen them either."

One of the Seattle reporters laughed. "Can you blame them?"

We ignored the remark. We were accustomed to that sort of comment. In case you don't follow pro basketball, the Blitzers are a first-year expansion team with a 2 and 36 record to date. There's been a fair share of ink making their case as the worst ball club in history. The cynics are well grounded in facts.

For instance, our starting center, Bad Times Johnston, is thirty-three years old and wears more tapes than King Tut. Power forward Kamikaze Ken Clay's moves are as subtle as Hitler's when he invaded Russia; Kenny has already fouled out of nineteen games. Mooch Mayhew, our point guard, has a jump shot that could be euphemistically termed as "low trajectory"; the ball is as likely to shatter the backboard as kiss twine. And the oldest of our seven rookies looks to be about fourteen.

Me? Dave Porterfield. I cover the Blitzers for the *Times-Guardian-Tribune*, and it's tough as hell to be fair. Next to me: Arnie Farber, the Voice of the Blitzers (some say the Mouth of the Blitzers), who does radio and TV play-by-play. He doesn't even try to be objective. He's a homer's l. arner. Arnie has blamed the Blitzers' sorry record on everything from myopic referees to full moons. He's up here with me now because there's nothing for him to do downstairs but stammer into his mike and repeat commercials.

"I don't get it," I said. "Their plane was due in around six."

We'd been blown out last night in L.A. Arnie and I caught a morning hop here, while the team charter was delayed by a fake bomb threat. By the time they'd gone through the motions, torn the ship apart and put it back together and broken ground, it was very, very late. That's typical of how the season's gone.

"It arrived right on time," Arnie said. "6:05 P.M. I confirmed it. They were seen getting on the bus, which was to bring them directly here because there wasn't time to get squared away at the hotel."

"Then where the hell is it?" I wondered out loud. "How do you lose twelve giants, two coaches, and a trainer?"

Arnie shrugged. His eyelids were at knee level. The guy really loved his Blitzers.

The Seattle scribe kept on the pressure. "Good thinking on their part,"

he said. "If they play hookey, they only forfeit. It goes into the books as two-zip. Better than a thirty-point wipeout."

Arnie reddened. "Is that an Olympia portable, Mike?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Small unit. Plenty of space to fit all the way in your mouth with room left over to return the carriage. Let's find out."

"Sorehead!"

"Hack! I saw you moving your lips when you read the menu."

I grabbed a handful of polyester and pulled Arnie back into his seat before a brawl broke out. A phone rang too and somebody shoved the receiver in his face. He listened, muttered, hung up, and faced me. "Lord God Almighty!"

Arnie was short, chubby, pink, just as cute as a button, but now he was the color of sweat socks.

"What?"

"The cops found the team bus and a note. The Blitzers have been stolen."

A police spokesman named Lieutenant Ellis held a news conference in the home locker room at one A.M. It was a tad cramped, us sports media folk having to share space with every general-news type west of Barbara Walters.

Lieutenant Ellis droned, reading a prepared statement. "At approximately eight o'clock this past evening the bus that picked up the Blitzers at the airport two hours earlier was discovered abandoned behind an out-of-business gas station three miles away. At roughly the same time, the driver assigned the charter was found bound and gagged in another bus on his company's parking ramp. Preliminary indications are that he was overpowered by two men wearing Army-surplus clothing and ski masks."

"How could something like that happen in broad daylight?" one of my esteemed colleagues interrupted.

We're great at that.

Ellis was tall, impassive, nicely dressed. I thought I saw a cold ripple of pleasure run across his lips. "Because, sir, it was *not* daylight. Then or later. Allow me to remind you that it is January, two weeks past the winter solstice, and the weather was foggy and drizzly. Perfect conditions for such an act."

"How about that note?"

"It was taped to the steering wheel of the bus," Ellis said. "The kidnappers identified themselves as members of an organization called the Third World Liberation Force. They stated their goal as, uh, to unshackle the masses of the oppressed nations with funds confiscated from the capitalistic oppressors, money that would be otherwise spent on elitist forms of entertainment."

"Elitist!" somebody behind us muttered. "Then why did they snatch the Blitzers?"

I pinned Arnie's arms before he could turn and discuss the matter further.

"Do you think it's related to the bomb threat in L.A. this morning? If so, what do you have on that?"

"Possibly, we theorize. To delay the flight until after dark. It was a quick, anonymous phone call. No leads or likelihood of any."

"Is there a ransom demand in the note?"

"According to it, we'll be instructed later in that regard. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That's all we have at the present."

In the lobby, Arnie made a call and learned that Willard St. Pierre's private plane had arrived and that he was at the hotel. Willard St. Pierre, owner of the Blitzers, was an overbearing, self-made millionaire who liked to hang around locker rooms, so he bought himself a toy. He was a wheeler-dealer, the quintessential horse trader who once acquired ten acres of prime land for a sailboat he'd won in a poker game. He made his bundle in condos and industrial parks. If you're looking for a prototype of the rapacious developer, you needn't look beyond stocky, balding Willard.

No one has the foggiest what he owns or what he's worth, though some have tried. His operation is too casually complex for sharp analysis, and Willard likes it that way.

Except for his Blitzers. With them he craves publicity. If you're a ball player and Willard invites you to the Club to knock the little white ball around you'd be advised to attend.

I'd expected a mob at the hotel, but such was not the case. I should've known better; Willard orchestrates the limelight, doesn't let it control him.

We entered his suite as three detectives were leaving. Jake Greene, Blitzler General Manager, was there, pacing about, silently fretting, as

if he'd just traded a high-draft choice for a veteran with knees that belonged in a pathology lab—which he actually did earlier in the season.

Business Manager Bruce Smith too. Smitty was in a corner, talking in hushed tones on the phone.

"C'mon in, guys," Willard yelled from the couch, a noxious cigar impaled in his mouth. "You might as well get your two cents' worth in. Them damn cops grilled me like I was the Boston Strangler or something."

We offered our condolences, but more lightly than we would for the dead. Arnie added, "It's their job, Chief. They have to cover all the bases, you know."

"Yeah, I suppose," Willard said. "Learn anything in the press conference?"

I shook my head. "What's Smitty up to?"

"Getting some bankers out of bed."

"Contingency plans," Jake Greene said bitterly. "These Commie punks aren't in it for their health."

Willard was puffing his cigar as if he was stoking a Bessemer converter. "The law'd better get on the stick fast. God, those boys are like my own sons! Same with my wife. Belle's out on her feet, loaded up with Valium. Really took it hard."

Arnie and I looked at each other. This is strictly off the record, but every warm body on the roster is on the trading block. Trouble is, our rivals aren't exactly battering down the front-office doors.

"And Sid Selkirk," Willard went on grimly, "Sid's the finest molder of young men I've ever had the pleasure to know."

Arnie and I avoided each other's eyes this time. Once a week, ritually, Willard gave Coach Sid Selkirk a public vote of confidence—the sports world's equivalent of the kiss of death—even after the Atlanta game when the dummy called a time-out when we didn't have any left. It cost the Blitzers a technical foul. Then Sid blew up and threw a folding chair onto the court. Another tec. We lost by one point. Sid was secure for the moment, nevertheless—applications weren't piling up on Jake Greene's desk, the Blitzers being the Siberia of pro sports.

Smitty, a skinny Stanford Business School dropout with the metabolism of a hummingbird, hung up the phone. His face was at the same altitude as his knees.

"Well?" Jake Greene demanded. Jake was built like Willard. He looked like he'd never had a night's sleep in his life.

"Creeps," Smitty said. "You'd think we were farmers with lung cancer trying to borrow on next year's crops."

"Fair-weather friends," Willard said evenly.

"Rats deserting a—" Arnie began, then stopped, thinking better of it.

Smitty answered the phone and handed it to Willard.

Willard listened, hung up, and said, "Let's head downtown, boys. The sharks are nipping at our toes again."

It was either a conference room or a large interrogation room with the thousand-watt reading lamp removed. The cops were there, naturally, and none of them wore uniforms. Brass! The FBI also, as you might imagine. And some unsmiling sorts who did not offer introductions. CIA? State Department? Possibly, international terrorism being quite the rage in some quarters, and if indeed this Third World Whatever kidnapped the Blitzers we had us an international incident brewing.

Although Lieutenant Ellis was probably outranked by everybody in the room except Arnie and me, he was given the floor. He had a nifty delivery, crisp and articulate, like a dee-jay on a classical music station. Anyway, that's what they paid him for.

"One of our emergency operators received a call. On 911. A ransom demand."

"Why not to me?" Willard bellowed. "I'm the owner! It's *my* boys!"

"I don't know, sir."

"Maybe they knew there was a trace on your line, Willard," Jake suggested.

"Yeah. That's it," Willard agreed, lighting a fresh stogie.

"I'm afraid not," Ellis said. "They *wanted* us to be aware where they were calling from. They called collect. Our operator was alert, cognizant of the situation. When he said he was with the Third World Liberation Force, she accepted the charges. The call came from a phone booth in Nogales, Arizona, which is right across the Mexican border. We alerted their police department, but the caller didn't stay long enough to be apprehended."

"C'mon," Willard protested. "How could these freaks get my boys down there so fast?"

"It's entirely feasible," Ellis said. "A number of small airports in the area, most of which are unattended at night, could accommodate an aircraft large enough to transport them. A portable homing device could

guide them in, even in these weather conditions. A five-to-six-hour time frame is more than ample."

"So a bunch of grubby little Marxists are probably in the Mexican hills with our boys?" Jake Greene asked sourly.

"Yes, sir. That could be the case."

"When we do get them back?" Jake grumbled. "What condition will they be in? Without proper diet and conditioning, we'll never get any momentum going, and we've got that Eastern swing coming up later in the month—Boston, Philly, New York. If Bad Times Johnston doesn't get a sixteen-ounce sirloin every day he's absolutely worthless. But I don't suppose these half-baked Reds give a damn what condition they return our property in."

Arnie and I traded eyeballs. Arnie and Jake never did hit it off. To Arnie, the Blitzers were icons; to Jake they were commodities.

Willard piped up, sparing us an ugly scene. "O.K., before you drop it on me how much dough they're asking for, how do we know this isn't a hoax?"

Lieutenant Ellis reached down and lifted a cardboard box onto the table in front of him. "I was hoping you gentlemen could clarify that. The caller told us where to find these items. In an apartment-house dumpster a block east of where the bus was located."

The five of us gathered around and pawed through its contents. Our grim expressions gave the authorities the information they needed.

Kamikaze Ken Clay's Spiro Agnew wristwatch with KKC engraved on back. Mooch Mayhew's gold necklace with the weird charms—he'd bought it from a gypsy in Cleveland, fraudulently assured that the amulets would improve his field-goal percentage. Fatty Logan's hotplate. Fatty was rapidly eating himself into a semi-pro job. He always packed it, along with groceries, in case he awakened in the middle of the night suffering extreme hunger pangs, which, according to his roomie, was a frequent occurrence.

And the clincher: Bad Times Johnston's custom-made 19EEE cowboy boots. Bad Times had long since made his peace with the Law of Gravity, but with his bulk and those canvas-and-rubber anchors he did a respectable job blocking out on the defensive boards.

Willard sighed and dragged himself back to his chair, moving with all the vigor of a Blitzer fast-break. "How much?"

"Five million dollars is the demand," Ellis said. "In five days they'll report back with delivery instructions."

After a confab with the FBI people on how they'd like to handle the exchange, we returned to the hotel.

"I haven't got it," Willard said. "Not even close."

"I had the impression business was great," I commented. I really did. Daddy Warbucks incarnate.

"We're talking cash, Dave," Willard said, rubbing his fingers together. "Geetus. Long green. Sure, I can liquidate some things, but not in five days. Nobody I know's got that much cash laying around."

"How about the other owners?" Arnie asked. "Wouldn't they pass the hat?"

Jake, Smitty, and Willard enjoyed a hearty laugh. "We hate each other's guts," Willard said. "We can't agree on the time of day. Even if they would chip in, we'd never put together a package in five days."

"Emergency expansion?" I asked.

"That's for restocking teams in case of a plane crash or something," Willard said. "Not for lining ol' Willard's pockets."

"And the bankers see it as strictly business," Smitty said. "We're drawing only three thousand a game, so they're in no mood to refinance."

Refinance? I always had the impression Willard owned the Blitzers free and clear.

"Our fans," Arnie said. "Our fans will save their team."

Jake laughed cynically. "How? Why? Half of them come to the games wearing paper bags over their heads and carrying obscene banners."

"Nice try, Arnie," Willard said. "What do you want to do, put on a telethon?"

"Hey!" Arnie brightened. "Yes! A telethon!" He brightened further. "This is different than bad play, Willard! The lives of our boys are in jeopardy and when you kidnap a city's pro-sports franchise it's like messing with Mom and apple pie—a desecration! The terrorists aren't just dealing with the Blitzers, they're slapping the faces of a million loyal Americans!"

Everyone was silent for a moment, except Arnie who was hyperventilating.

"Come to think of it, they're the best damn bunch of bleacher creatures I've ever had the pleasure to know," Willard said behind a billow of noxious smoke. "They can pull together and be real understanding in the

face of a crisis. Like that time Bad Times snagged that rebound, got a little carried away with his outlet pass, and busted out the scoreboard. The game was delayed an hour and hardly anybody booed."

I remembered that.

They didn't boo because they were too busy laughing.

"Twenty-six hundred in repairs," Smitty mumbled.

"We'll do it!" Arnie cried out, jumping to his feet. "A telethon! Wednesday's game in Phoenix was to be simulcast—I'm sure we can talk the station into postponing their Doris Day Film Festival so we can run it from eight to two A.M. What do you say, Willard?"

"I don't know," I offered. "Aren't telethons normally for medical research? Some might regard this as frivolous."

Arnie glared at me, crimson. "One more nail into the coffin of Western Civilization as we know it and you say 'frivolous'?"

Jake Greene evidently shared Arnie's outrage. "What was your name in Russian before you changed it to Porterfield?"

I shut up before they sliced open some pillows and sent out for tar.

Willard raised a clenched fist. "It's a go—we'll do it! We'll toss in free tickets with every pledge! We *will* get my boys back!"

I stayed on in Seattle because my paper couldn't spare a crime or general news reporter and with the Blitzers out of action I had nothing better to do. My job was to keep in touch with Lieutenant Ellis, hardly a demanding assignment. With the Blitzers obviously hundreds and thousands of miles away, the media hordes had cleared out of town too.

I missed the telethon, which was just as well, because Arnie, its emcee, didn't want me involved. He's a nice enough guy but tends to hold grudges and my "frivolous" comment probably meant we wouldn't be speaking for the remainder of the season.

Tips were coming in from everywhere, from Mexicali to Rangoon to Calumet City, but none of them panned out. You'd think something would break, with Blitzler faces plastered on every front page and TV screen in the nation.

Zilch.

This was the Story of the Year. A heavyweight championship fight, a flap in the Middle East, a devastating cyclone, a famous television actress's separation from her fourth husband—the momentous events of the day were virtually ignored in favor of fifteen men held against their will.

I caught the telethon secondhand. It was the lead story in the news the morning after. Arnie was in fine form, eloquent and passionate. Checks, cash, and credit-card numbers poured in from sea to shining sea. They raised \$3,857,050. At the wrap-up, Willard St. Pierre tearfully thanked us all, saying he'd cover the difference if he had to pawn the shirt on his back.

The sheet of paper in my typewriter was pure as the one the night of the crime. What could you say that hadn't been said? All you could do, lacking hard information, was editorialize. But there was no dearth of sermons; anchorpersons and high-horsepower columnists in all fifty states and regions beyond had already beaten the incident into mush, draped with the flag, heady in their outrage.

Being a congenital cynic, I'd called Riley Harkness, the *Times-Guardian-Tribune's* business editor, asking about Willard St. Pierre and his closeted skeletons.

No luck. Riley told me what I already knew: in a computer age, Willard ran his empire out of his back pocket, keeping just enough records to fend off the IRS and the local overseers of corporate hanky-panky.

Bored as hell and frustrated, I sat in my hotel room, my prime concern being where to have dinner that evening. There were two pieces of reading material in my room. I passed on the Gideon and allowed my fingers to do the walking.

I froze at a listing under INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENTS, no longer bored.

Lieutenant Ellis accompanied me under protest. "This is rather thin, Mr. Porterfield. We're in the County too, out of the Department's jurisdiction. And as you're aware, my job is of a public-relations nature."

"I'm glad you could make it," I said, stopping my rental car on the shoulder of the highway.

We were three minutes from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, blessed with a cold crisp sky; a half-moon provided the only illumination on the area of my interest.

"Mr. St. Pierre has been thoroughly investigated," Ellis said. "His whereabouts were fully accounted for and nothing in his financial structure indicates a tenuous position."

"Figures," I said. "Were you able to get the gadget I asked for?"

-We got out of the car. Ellis opened a small case and removed a device.

On one end there was a stethoscope, on the other earphones, in the middle an amplifier.

"I've never operated one of these before," Ellis said as we walked up the new asphalt.

I asked, "Don't you think it's strange that this complex is nearly completed and there are no tenants, no FOR LEASE signs anywhere?"

"It's a Canadian-owned holding—not unusual, considering it's only a three-hour drive to the border. They often maintain a low profile."

"I phoned their number," I said. "It was an answering service. I tried them eight times. Nobody returned my calls."

We were inside the chain-link fencing now. A dozen squat concrete structures faced us, identical with corner offices and roll-up doors, front and rear. No lights, no cars, no sign of life.

"It's my daughter's birthday," Ellis said, placing the stethoscope against the first steel door.

"I'll try to make it up to her if I'm wrong," I said sincerely.

We'd done three with no results, and were headed to the fourth.

"For your own protection, I'll not mention this fiasco," Ellis said, shivering.

"Willard once swapped a medical-dental office in Tucson for a shipment of Philippine mahogany," I answered weakly. "Who knows who holds the pink slip on this atrocity?"

Ellis lingered at the next one. He was shaky when he walked back to me, and it wasn't just the thirty-degree temperature. "Voices," he said. "Faint voices."

"What?"

"Most of it was garbled, except for one thing. *Five million!*"

We hotfooted it out to find a phone. I slowed at the entrance, stopping at the little sign. For effect, I suppose. But mostly to rub it in. BELLEWOOD INDUSTRIAL PARK. Ellis stopped politely. "His wife, as you explained?"

"Willard thinks the world of Belle," I said. "Twenty-seven blissful years. He named his yacht after her. Why not a project?"

You could describe it as either an open house at a police academy or D-Day at Omaha Beach. They parked their vehicles down the street and tiptoed in, more than fifty officers in flak jackets, carrying weapons, some of which I swear were still classified by the Pentagon.

A sheriff's captain got on the bullhorn and announced: "You're surrounded. It's hopeless. Make it easy on yourselves. One minute to come out with hands held high." The usual. Sure, it sounded like a Hollywood script, but what else are you going to say?

Nothing happened for an agonizing sixty seconds. I was well to the rear, flat on the icy pavement. There could be a Pulitzer in this, but not if I caught an anti-tank rocket between the eyes. Terrorists, I knew, regardless of their motives, played hardball.

The door rolled up on its tracks and two wimpy little guys walked out with their hands atop their heads. They seemed to know what to do when the jig was up, like they'd had some experience.

I rushed inside with the law. The ball players, Coach Selkirk, and the trainer were sitting on the floor, wearing handcuffs and leg irons. They seemed happy and comfortable but logy, tranquilized. A buffet-style table was set up, the walls insulated, the door leading to the office spray-painted and taped at the edges.

A pair of machine guns were propped up against the refrigerator. The guys were definitely zonked but aware enough of the situation to know the cavalry had arrived. They struggled to their feet, smiling and cheering. All but Bad Times Johnston, who crouched, wrapping himself in his own arms. He was, after all, in his stockings, on bare concrete.

The two hired thugs implicated the third, the ringer in Arizona whose only job was to dial a telephone. Not to mention Willard, who decided not to make bail, although I think he could've done so easily out of petty cash. But they shipped him home to our very own calaboose and carloads of young men wearing Blitzer T-shirts (the things had sold like Edsels previously) were frequently seen circling the jail building and Willard, I assume, did not relish the prospect of a necktie party.

He wasn't talking either, except perhaps to the high-rent Eastern law firm he'd hired. I doubt if they'll do him much good. With Willard indisposed, the authorities had the opportunity to turn his business structure inside out. It was, they found, a house of cards, and the money he was losing with the Blitzers was about to bring it down in a heap.

I doubt if Willard thought he'd raise the full five million when he planted the telethon idea on Arnie, but the three-point-eight million he planned to pay himself would've propped up the cards quite nicely.

The Blitzers? They're just fine, thank you. With the drug out of their

systems and after several hard workouts, they were able to entertain Milwaukee Tuesday night as scheduled.

It was nationally televised and sixteen thousand faithful filled our building. Standing room only. Cheered on by the fans, we were unbeatable. Bad Times Johnston and Kamikaze Kenny Clay owned the boards. Mooch Mayhew's artillery barrages dropped in from everywhere on the court. Our rookies played like all-stars. We won going away, by twelve.

I was called down in the third quarter to replace Arnie Farber (my pal again) on the microphone. He had screamed himself hoarse.

I interviewed Bad Times on the post-game show, tossing in every cliché I could think of in probing reasons for the stunning victory. Momentum. Intensity. Fan support. Greater togetherness because of the adversity they'd endured. Et cetera.

"I guess that's part of it," Bad Times said.

"What else?"

"The rest," he said. "Getting sixteen hours of sleep a day in midseason. That's unheard of."



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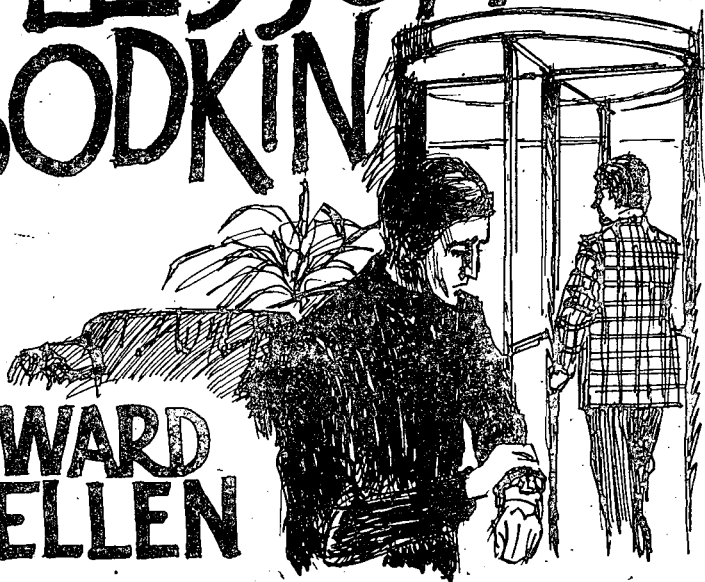
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Bodkin never lied to a hard case . . .

A LESSON FOR BODKIN

by
**EDWARD
WELLEN**



Bodkin's sharp all over, physiognomywise. He has these sharp ears and these sharp eyes and especially this sharp nose. They're for sticking into other people's business.

This particular day he's standing in the lobby of his single-occupancy building, just minding his own business, which, as aforesaid, is minding other people's business, when these two guys come within his purview,

an thing easy to do; it would be harder to stay out of Bodkin's all-encompassing purview.

Bodkin naturally takes the strangers in. They're a sporty type and a hard case, and they're talking seriously, and naturally Bodkin reaches out his ears and snatches a bit of their conversation.

The sporty type says, "It's five to one."

The hard case nods and says, "O.K."

That's all. They part company, the sporty type heading jauntily for the revolving door, the hard case making lumberingly for the news counter.

Bodkin pushes back his cuff for a peek at his wristwatch, and luck is with him. His heart pings as he sees how he can mix in.

All the same, he double-checks his never-fail digital wristwatch to make sure he's right. Then he eases up to the guy and touches his elbow.

The guy whirls slowly and gives Bodkin a hard look. "Yeah?"

Bodkin shakes his head. "It's not five to one. It's fifteen to one."

The guy narrows his eyes. "You sure of that?"

Bodkin draws himself up. Has he ever lied to the hard case? "Sure as shooting."

"Dead sure?"

Bodkin attenuates himself even more. "Didn't I say I was?"

The hard case mutters to himself, "I warned him never to short me." He spins on his heels and rushes out and catches up with the sporty type just outside the building, pulls a gun and shoots him dead.

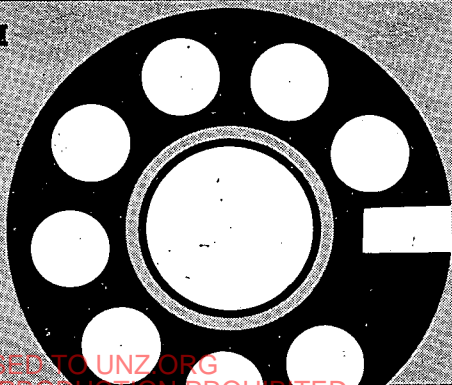
By the time the cops have come and gone, leaving the sidewalk once more in its pristine condition, strewn only with crumpled wrappers and chewed gum and brownbagged fifths, Bodkin realizes his mistake. He sure has learned a lesson. "Five to one" can refer to odds as well as to the time.

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Pixi had come to the bar to say goodbye. . . .

THE NIGHT I GOT SHOT

by
**ROBERT
TWOHY**



A few minutes past 11:00 on the night of April 27, 1976, I got shot.

It was at Pete's Place: I'd walked in about 9:00, not intending to spend any time. Just a couple of drinks, then back to the typewriter with a fresh view of the problem I was stuck on. A couple, maybe three—that was all I'd have.

With a beer or two, of course, to chase them down.

It wasn't reasonable that the investigating cops would have missed the

blood-stained playing card, the queen of spades, clutched in the left fist of the murder victim—that was my problem. But they *had* to miss it, so that later the heroine, Pixi Goodworth, after digging up the casket and jimmying the lid off, would pry open the dead man's fingers and find the card there, just as she'd deduced—the blood-spattered clue that the murdered man had grabbed with his last grab pointing straight to the murderer, Dan Bolinn, the crooked attorney.

Drinking it over, I got an insight that stunned me with the truth of it—you have storytelling genes or you don't. So you can strain and suffer over a plot problem—or you can step away from it and go to your genes, which, if they're of the storytelling variety, will carry you up and over your obstacle every time!

Having flashed on that I saw no reason I shouldn't relax a little. Why not? It's a fine feeling, licking a tough plot problem.

"Again, George. Or no, make it a double. And I need another beer."

I really liked my new detective heroine, Pixi Goodworth. She was something special. I'd based her on a special girl I'd been in love with one summer thirty-plus years ago and hadn't seen since. Vicky Keckman, her name was. I borrowed her ash-blonde hair, terrific shape, downy complexion, bright blue eyes—all the things I remembered from that golden summer. Gave them all to Pixi, along with the way Vicki had walked, talked, smiled, laughed, frowned, giggled, yawned, purred—and Pixi came to life the way no fiction girl of mine ever had before.

My plan was that if this first story about her caught on, there'd be more stories—and maybe, in time, she'd win a place in the affections of the public as the most adorable mystery-story enchantress since Nora Charles, as played by Myrna Loy. I might make a lot of money.

"George!" I called.

So what if Dr. Langley at Vets Hospital had told me another bout like the last one and I'd likely have a seizure? What's a seizure? He said I'd probably had them numerous through the years. So what? I'd never felt one. If you don't know when you have them, what's the big deal?

As George structured my new double I told myself that people like Langley don't understand that at certain times a writer needs three or four drinks, with a few beers as chaser—not to get drunk but for a fresh view on a problem. And he can't let sniveling fears of a seizure keep him from doing what he has to for a clear head.

And the proof of *that*, as I saw clearly in the good-natured little glass

I held up in front of me, was that right now, having had my insight about genes, I didn't have the least worry about how I was going to finish the story.

"To hell with seizures!" I told George, who nodded and moved away to serve the guys down the bar.

I put the fresh whiskey into me and hardly knew it, it went down so smooth. I didn't even need a swallow of beer—but took some anyway. Whiskey's for a clear head and beer because it tastes good. There's no danger in drinking if you know why you're doing it; which is why although I've put away a fair amount in my fifty-plus years I've never had what you'd call a drinking problem.

I got another double from George and thought about people I knew with a drinking problem. The clarity of mind I had now made it easy to hone in on the difference between a problem drinker and someone who to whom a few drinks are constructive. The key question is, why does this person drink? Does he drink because he doesn't know why he drinks, or because he does? That's the key question. The answer, if it's yes, is that then you have what you look for in a drinker, as I am, the purpose of whom is to get and maintain a clear head, which I had accomplished this evening, and seizures had never bothered me anyway if I'd ever had any, which I doubted despite Langley who's an egotistical type and not the least bit kindly or reassuring.

Because George is intelligent I knew he'd be interested in the flood of insights I was having. "George, you know the reason I stop in here is with a purpose."

He nodded and looked attentive, knowing I was being serious. He can respond when a subject comes up that's on a somewhat higher plane than whether Muhammed Ali could have stayed two rounds with the Brown Bomber or why the 49ers can't ever seem to get their act together.

"So you don't ever have to worry about serving me too much, because I never take more than it takes for good insights."

George said in a thoughtful way, "Yeah."

"Like, take genes. Without them you're in a twilight zone, like a rudder without a compass. Take your nose. It's big. That often indicates strong genes. So when in doubt or you have a plot problem, go to your nose—or rather, your genes."

He nodded.

"I do, weekends at the ranch." He owns a ranch up at Los Palos.

He went off to serve someone.

Looking after him down the bar I saw no one else who looked like they had good genes, or genes of any kind. They all slumped over their glassware in a completely devoid way. I was glad I sat straight—and could sit even straighter, I thought—so I lifted my head and stretched my shoulders back, maybe too suddenly because I got a fast whirling sensation and for a few moments there were whirls, nothing but whirls. Then I felt someone clutching my wrist and the whirls stopped as suddenly as they had started.

I asked, "Why are you clutching my wrist, George?"

"So you won't go over on your head."

"Have I ever gone over on my head?"

"Now and then. You better call it a night."

He had to be kidding. To my knowledge I'd never gone over on my head—and what else had he said? Call it a night?

"That's right. You've had enough."

I wondered if he was as intelligent as I'd thought. I *hadn't* had enough—not in the sense he used the phrase. If I had, how could my thoughts be so clear?

I asked him that, not in the loud whiny voice of a problem drinker when he's been cut off, but coolly and reasonably—and went on, "It's not that I need or particularly *want* another, but the implication that I lack the perception to perceive if I've had enough is what hurts because it's not the amount you drink but if it's with a purpose, as I always am which it surprises me you seem to have forgotten because I'm sure I just mentioned it."

But his ability to comprehend thoughts of a higher nature seemed to have deserted him. He growled, "That's all for tonight," and moved away down the bar.

I shouted after him that if he looked in the mirror he'd see someone acting ridiculous.

A slow voice behind me said, "All you do is drink."

Turning slowly, I saw a young woman in a shapely blue sweater, neat matching slacks, and perky yellow slippers at the end. Under ash-blonde hair, bright blue eyes gazed at me steadily.

Goose pimples rising all over me. Inside me feelings of great joy. I stared at this young woman I had created from memories of a long-gone love, reached and took her hand. Warm, firm—reality! She wasn't a figment, she was real!

The surging joy within me turned liquid, came spilling out my eyes onto the adorable hand I had taken to my lips. "Why have you come?"

"To say goodbye."

"Goodbye! You've only just come!"

From down the bar I heard my name called in George's rumble voice. I didn't look. What did I care about George? "Why? Why goodbye?"

She took back her hand, wiped it on her sweater. "Because all you do is drink. And I'll never have my chance."

"For what?"

"To be famous. Like Nora Charles—as portrayed by Myrna Loy."

"But that's my dream for you!"

"Yes, your *dream*. I can't live on alcohol dreams. I need publication."

"So do I! Together we'll—"

"No. You'll never finish the story. I have to find a writer who will."

"Me! I'm the one!"

"I need to be understood. I've cried out to you but you haven't listened. I want to be cherished—you haven't cherished me."

"I have! I will! We'll go home right now. You'll sit beside me and I'll look at you and write, and it'll all be beautiful. We'll make a beautiful story together—"

"No. All you do is drink."

"Drink! D'you think drink means anything to me?" I reached back, seized the empty glass, and hurled it the long length of the room. It landed on the pool table, rolled down it, and fell in a corner pocket. The symbolism of its disappearance was striking. I heard a ragged cheer, probably from the people without genes at the bar, and a rumbling roar, probably from George.

I gazed at Pixi, letting all my yearning hang out, and now her look wasn't quite so steady. I saw a flicker—she was changing her mind, she would come home with me.

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. "Snap out of it!"

It was too much—at this point in time, George horning in.

"Who asked *your* opinion?" I threw off his hand and leaped from the stool. My feet being still in the rungs, I went straight down, the stool coming with me. Disentangling, pushing myself up, I saw Pixi walking away from me toward the door.

Two guys had just come in. They had dark things over their heads. Pixi was moving toward them and one of them lingered at the door. The other

walked past her and stopped midway along the bar and said in a high voice, "Raise 'em high, this is a stickup. No dumb stuff and don't nobody move."

Pixi kept moving as if she hadn't heard. *I* had heard, but what did *I* care about a robbery? "Pixi, wait! We'll make a beautiful story!"

She walked quickly around the guy near the door, who made no move to block her. I saw he had a gun like the other guy and that the things over their heads were ski masks. What did I care? I started running. My legs were wobbly but not too bad. "Pixi!"

The midway guy squeaked, "Are you nuts?"

The door was swinging shut behind her and it was quicker to run into him than around him, so I did, barreling him out of my way. He squawked something and went back and down, and the guy near the door babbled something and fired.

I kept running for the door. Why should I be afraid? I knew who the two guys were. Under the ski masks they were Dan Bolinn's two goons, who were for comic relief in the story. Like Pixi, they'd come to life and moseyed into Pete's with something clownish in mind. The bullet hadn't been meant to hit me, it was the guy's dumb idea of wit.

Still on the move, I glanced back and saw the goon I'd piled into was down and quiet, all crumpled up—he must have cracked his skull on the bar-rail. His gun lay away from him. George had his own gun from under the back bar and was yelling something at me. The geneless group along the bar was staring—

Not planning it, I-ploughed into the second guy, slamming him back against the door frame. His gun spun loose and I caught it and slung it back into the room and shoved on through the door, staring around and yelling, "Pixi? Pixi!"

A cab was down the block, driving away. I called after it and jumped around, waving my arms, but he didn't see me or she had told him to drive on.

So she had come, for a minute, to reality, back into my life—and now she was gone.

And I hadn't quite had the chance to tell her that if she felt drinking wasn't good for her career, I wouldn't drink any more—even though I had always found it the best treatment for a plot problem.

I went back into Pete's. The two goons drooped at a table, their ski masks off. They had dumb losers' faces and looked at me like they saw

something peculiar. All the guys at the bar looked at me like that. George, in front of the bar, his gun pointing at the two guys, looked at me the same way and growled, "You been shot."

"No, it was just a dumb joke the guy pulled—"

But suddenly I felt a lot of pain, looked down, and saw the front of me all red.

I sat down on the floor, staring at the goon who had shot me, and muttered, "Why'd you do that? You're just for comic relief."

It was kind of funny at that. A nobody like him, trying to beef up his part. Every two-bit extra wants to be a star.

I had to laugh. But it turned into coughing, so I laid off. I sat there, felt less pain, got drowsy, lay back. George told someone to wad up a coat and slide it under my head. I thought of Pixi and wondered if I'd ever see her again.

Not if I died I wouldn't.

I was back in Vets Hospital, where they did all kinds of things to my insides. A month or so passed and the doctors said I'd be O.K., more or less, but to lay off getting shot in the lung because next time could be fatal.

Langley came in, looking bedraggled as usual—he's the least doctoral-looking doctor I've ever known—and said that my blood-alcohol level and the condition of my brain when I was dragged in left no doubt that I'd had a bunch of new seizures since last he'd seen me.

I said maybe so, but because I had a purpose in drinking I had no problem.

"I read you were a hero and knocked out a pair of gunmen. Was that smart?"

"I guess not, but at the time I wasn't worried. I thought they were guys I knew."

"Were they?"

"No."

He rubbed his scruffy-looking jaw. "Why'd you think they were?"

I shrugged. It was too much to go into a month or so later.

"Did you know they've been extradited back to Oklahoma, where they broke jail where they were doing life for a drugstore holdup where some people were killed?"

"I heard that." No way were they the comic-relief guys from my story. As for Pixi—

He was peering at me with his non-heartwarming eyes. "What's on your mind?"

"There was a girl in the bar."

"Not according to the paper. The bartender and your fellow drunks said you were alone, babbling and yelling. The bartender said he'd never seen a guy kiss his own hand and cry over it."

"I read the article." I used my cold voice.

"Then you jumped off the stool, fell, got up, slammed into the first guy, got shot, slammed into the other guy, and staggered out the door wailing 'Pixi!'" He grinned unwinsomely. "It must have been quite a show—I wish I'd been there."

I said, "She was real. I could count the soft little hairs on her cheeks."

"She had a beard?"

"No, down! Around the curve of her cheeks, soft golden down!"

"Sounds like a fresh-hatched chicken. You don't have a thing about chickens too, do you? I mean, in addition to your hand?"

I looked away, expressionless, which is the best response to sophomore humor of that type. He gave a few wheezes of self-appreciation, then asked, "Did she say anything, or just cluck?"

"She said all I did was drink."

"Smart girl. Pixi, huh? D'you know who she was?"

"A girl from a story I was working on."

"She was yourself—the part of you that knows what a mess you've been making of your life."

"Come on, my complexion isn't downy. And I don't wear tight sweaters or perky yellow slippers."

"Lay off the comedy."

"You're a great one to talk."

He walked to the door and turned. "Want to see more spooks? Just keep on drinking."

"She wasn't a spook. She was beautiful."

"Nice. But I practically guarantee—next time you see her it'll be with a face like beef left out in the sun, her great figure all gone down her front, sores over her eyes, fingers like hooks, drooling and cackling—downy cheeks stuck over with old food and scabs and general debris."

He'd got to me, as he'd meant to. "Why would she look like that?"

"You figure it out." He winked, gave me a two-finger wave, and slouched out.

So there I lay, with time to put in at Vets and figuring out to do.

Somehow I had the feeling that, rotten person though he is, he was right. If I kept on drinking she'd come back to me just the way he'd described.

I'd made her out of a beautiful memory. So let her stay that way, beautiful, wherever she is—I don't want her back repulsive.

I hope she's found a nice person who'll cherish her.

It's a good thing I don't have a drinking problem—so it won't be a big effort to lay off the drinking.

No more Pete's Place. Nevermore?

Well, nevermore's a scary word. That's why Poe used it in the poem. So don't think in big chunks of time like that. Think in small chunks.

And don't get intense. Just take it easy, see how it goes.

Which were thoughts I had in Vets Hospital five years ago, a month or so after April 27, 1976—the night I got shot.

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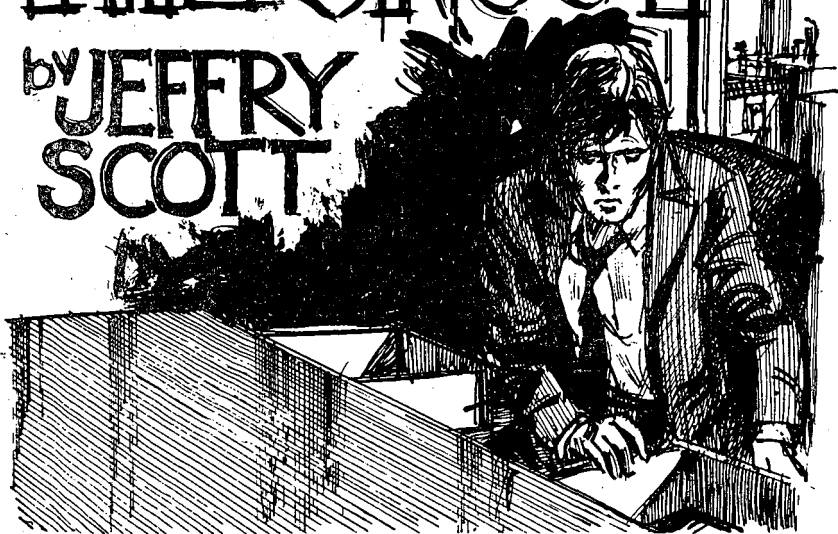
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DB213-4

*He'd never heard of a victim returning to the scene of the crime,
Percy French said . . .*

THE SNOOP

by JEFFERY
SCOTT



His career had taken more than a decade to build. It died in a matter of hours. Steve Bass was ordered to clear his desk—while they watched to ensure that only meaningless personal property went with him.

Nobody snapped that he must never show his face in the firm again, but that was only because the ban was nailed down in legal jargon on the document Steve had felt forced to sign. Get out and stay out, *traitor*.

Less than a day later he was striding through executive territory like

a man with every right to be around. Pleasant-looking rather than handsome, fair hair ruffled, clothes he'd slept in.

At seven in the morning, cleaners owned the place. Women and girls in pink smocks had taken over big-deal desks and were decanting tea and gossip. They didn't know who he was, and might not have cared if told. All the same, he felt queasy hurrying past them.

Rejecting the possibility of guilt and shame couldn't keep the emotions away nor make them easier to bear.

He found his office nakedly empty, even its carpet gone. A neat oblong of primer paint obliterated his name and title on the door. Stencils were laid out on a drop cloth, ready for this morning's work: MR. W. HANDEL, COMMUNICATIONS.

Staring at the place where his desk had stood, Steve laughed discordantly. You could never tell about people. Last night he'd been touched when Bill Handel turned up and insisted on taking him on a pub-crawl. "I'm a non-person, a traitor," Steve had warned bitterly, "you want to be careful, Bill."

Handel, one of the firm's more political animals, shrugged and grimaced. "You were framed, old son. If they don't like it, stuff 'em, I say. Geowide needs me more than yours truly needs them. I think you've been treated foully, Steve."

He hadn't added that he'd snapped up Steve's office, slightly larger than his own, before hurrying round to show sympathy and solidarity for an ex-colleague.

Steve thought, with a touch of panic: What's happened to my desk, the letters? Poor Josie!

The voice made him jump. "I know murderers are supposed to return to the scene of the crime, but I've never heard of the victim doing it."

Whirling, Steve wanted to curse—or cry. Of all people to find him here, Percy French was the last he'd have chosen.

Guessing the reaction, French smiled thinly. He was a tubby, slightly untidy fellow, whose thrust-forward balding head gave him a faint air of the tortoise, except that tortoises don't wear Ben Franklin spectacles.

"You'd better come with me," French mumbled, "I've had the kettle on for half an hour, waiting for you."

Which was crazy. French was a scientist turned administrator, with a seat on the Board. Steve had never been sure of French's role in the company. Mainly, though, he was a snooper for pleasure and profit,

making it his business to discover who owed money to a bookie, who was unhappy with his wife or too happy with a colleague, male or female.

Steve said stiffly, "I only looked in for a moment, I forgot a—personal item." But French had gone into his office, from which steam was wisping, so he hadn't been kidding about the kettle.

Once inside, Steve realized that Percy French must be more important, influential, than he seemed. Sir Gordon Thorogood, chairman of Geo-wide, was fanatical about tidy work springing from an even tidier environment. An ex-infantry line officer, Sir Gordon had nostalgic hunger for kit inspections, and more than one promotion had foundered on the reefs of a disorderly desk or a dartboard badly concealed behind a filing cabinet or golf clubs coyly standing behind a topcoat on the clothes hook.

French's room was as untidy as it ever would be. Yellowing columns of old newspapers rose from the carpet and there was a small forest of potted plants. Fussing over the kettle, a cracked teapot, an Arsenal Football Club souvenir mug, and a cup and saucer in bone china, he spoke casually. "The letters are safe, Bass. You can have them in a minute." He passed Steve the mug.

Steve scalded his lips.

French sat down with a grunt of contentment. "You had a trying time yesterday, it was natural enough to forget them, tucked away at the back of a drawer. Or couldn't you bring yourself to produce them with the security men looking on? Yes, that would be it. They'd have insisted on a sight of the letters in case they included data."

"You've had a sight of them," Steve said with difficulty. His stare was defiant.

"Enough to get their gist. No wonder you kept them locked up here instead of at home." French sighted Steve through the tiny oblong lenses. "Sometimes I think half the world's troubles are caused by people who won't destroy love letters."

"It's not what you think! Not—sordid," Steve blurted out. "Sheila and I still lived in the same house then, but the marriage was a joke. And Jo—the lady concerned—has ample grounds for divorce but won't do it until the children are older. Neither of us is cheating anyone, not really."

French, taken aback, stirred his tea hard and sprayed droplets on a hideously stained blotter. "My dear boy, I don't make moral judgments. Not that kind anyway."

"I'll have my letters back then."

The tortoise head pulled in stubbornly. "All in good time."

"You had no right to nose through them. It's despicable." What a mess, he thought. One of those envelopes held a snapshot Josie had insisted on taking that long weekend in Scotland. She'd set the camera timer and balanced it on a stone wall, scurrying back to hug Steve and laugh into the lens. A perfectly proper photograph—and intensely compromising in its way. The bright young hope of Geowide's R and D Section and the deputy managing director's wife.

"Not clever, keeping them here of all places," Percy French pointed out.

"I had to. Sheila would have found them at home. After the divorce I never got around to shifting them. They should have been safe, locked in my desk."

"Oh, desk locks." French cradled the teacup like a brandy snifter, spectacles misting. "Pop down to old Findlay in Maintenance and he'll lend you a master key. That's how Handel opened your desk. Nothing sinister. You've got an old-model desk and he wasn't certain whether his tape recorder would fit in the drawer. I happened to be wandering around at the time and took those letters for safekeeping. Bill would have returned them to you—unread, it goes without saying. Your name is plain on the envelopes, after all."

Face hot, Steve started to speak but French cut in.

"Listen, we're talking survival. Yours is a by-product or I might not be investing time on it. More than enough firms are going down the drain as it is, from the recession and the blasted Procrustian philosophies of the Blessed Margaret, our Leaderene. I won't have Geowide bled to death by industrial spying, Bass. I just won't have it."

"Save it," Steve sneered. "Sir Gordon gave me all that at my drumhead court martial yesterday. What's the matter with you people? I'm out on my ear, probably unemployable, thanks to the grapevine. I've only just missed a court case and prison. My overdraft stands at 950 pounds and my prospects are zero. What the hell d'you want, blood?"

"Dear, dear. Such indignation! No, the truth would do nicely, Bass." The tubby man rose abruptly. "Drink your tea, it's too expensive to waste. Then we'll go motoring. Gordon Thorogood makes a fetish of being first in of a morning and I'd rather you didn't meet just yet."

"Or ever." Steve leaned back and crossed his legs. "I'm not playing, Percy."

"You are." French flashed his dentures. "You want those letters back."

"Bear with me," Percy French shouted. He had to shout. The open-top Alvis rumbled like a bus, with squeaks and rattles from the abused bodywork. The owner's penny-pinching evidently failed when it came to personal transport. Steve calculated the Alvis did about twelve miles to the gallon. They were driving in slow loops through Westminster, Big Ben turning and bo-peeping at him past office blocks.

To Steve's relief, French pulled in outside a derelict store. "Bear with me," he repeated. "Gordon Thorogood gave me a version of your misdeeds. His version, that is. Favor me with yours, dear boy."

"I'm sick of this."

"All the more reason to satisfy me."

Sighing, Steve filled and lit his pipe. "O.K. You know it's about the fuel cell. That, and solar energy."

"Spare me the technicalities," French murmured.

"You'd never understand them. Anyway, our German subsidiary is ahead on some of the back-up technology. The whole thing is so-hush-hush Coverdale didn't want us to approach them directly, even though they belong to us. He's probably right—our line of research is a need-to-know scene."

"John Coverdale's a cautious bloke," French agreed. "Devious, one might say. Carry on."

"Coverdale told me to invent a reason to spend a week at the Frankfurt labs. That was easy; and since he's the United Kingdom boss of R and D, Frankfurt gave me red-carpet treatment while I pretended to be interested in one thing and mopped up all the details on another. They didn't see the significance—their thrust is on electric cars."

French wriggled, drumming his fingers on the massive steering wheel. His spectacles glinted. "Very well, Bass, Geowide was spying on itself in a way—at Frankfurt. So what were you doing in Brussels? You can't deny you were there."

Steve nodded grimly. "I was there. It was bad luck running into Terry Raikes at the airport. Jo—the lady I came to see—spotted him in time. She turned her back and stepped away from me. Terry pretended to miss me, but he must have seen my face."

"Drop the innocent expression, French! Terry Raikes blew the gaff on me—either innocently or by flat-out going to Johnny Coverdale and asking

what I'd been doing in Brussels. But I've got no grudge against him—I should have thought. Her husband was in Brussels for the trade fair. The chances were high that Terry Raikes would be there too. God! We can't meet in London, for obvious reasons. So we grab every chance to sneak away, even if it means going hundreds of miles for a few hours alone. I love her, but this secret-agent action is horrible."

Percy French heaved round to stare Steve in the face. "But that's what you are, old boy. That's exactly what you are, an industrial espionage agent. 'Turned' is the word, I believe: you tried to sell our most valuable material to the highest bidder." He sounded less angry than baffled.

"Rubbish!" Steve yelled. "I signed that confession, I took the disgrace and the—the ruin—because I had to. How could I explain why I'd sneaked off to Brussels? O.K., it was a highly confidential inquiry. But you've feasted on my personal correspondence, you know who she is. Her husband would find out, and he's desperate for custody of the kids."

"Um." Percy French pushed the glasses back up his sharp nose and got the car going.

"I'd done everything in Frankfurt by the Friday morning. The weekend was my own. I just turned my Frankfurt-London air ticket into a Frankfurt-Brussels one and paid the difference for the extra travel home out of my own pocket. The firm lost nothing."

French sniggered sourly. "Hardly. We nearly lost our most valuable, potentially valuable, trade secrets, eh? Fortunately, MaxImp is an honorable rival. More honorable than you anyway, Bass."

"Let me out here, Mr. French. We've nothing more to say." Frustration and rage made Steve tremble.

The old man speeded a little instead, the Alvis roaring along beside the Thames. "More honorable than the person who tried to sell the power cell, their identity unknown then," he suggested. "I like your story, Bass, though it's a wee bit melodramatic—sacrificing all for a lady and so forth. The snag is, MaxImp's headquarters is in Brussels."

He declutched neatly, feet dancing on the pedals, as they nosed in at the end of the day's first rush-hour line. A cheerful, pimply youth glided alongside on a Honda, winked at French, and cackled, "Always the same, guv—it's you old blokes what get the flashy sports cars, eh?"

Percy French laughed unfeignedly as the boy eeled past the front end and shot away when the light changed. For a second his face was surprisingly kind. Then the smile vanished.

"MaxImp is in Brussels and so were you. The day before that, Thursday, Max Scheldt, MaxImp's chairman, got a phone call from, oddly enough, Frankfurt. He tells us the caller was British, youngish, well educated. The man offered to sell all Geowide's power-cell research for two hundred thousand pounds, one-third payable on receipt of the initial batch of material. Very businesslike. He told Max to wait for a further call on Friday afternoon—when you arrived in Brussels as it happens."

It was impossible to tell whether French's words were sarcastic or could be taken at face value.

"Scheldt contacted us at once. The caller had the ignorance or ill fortune to pick the one individual guaranteed to expose him. Scheldt nearly came a cropper in the Sixties through leaks from his firm. He hates traitors, his or anyone else's, even sworn rivals, with a passion.

"The Friday call was duly made, Max Scheldt was invited to the Atomium neighborhood on Friday night. The caller said he was tall, fair-haired, and would be driving a red car; he supplied the registration-plate number."

"I know, I know." Steve cracked his knuckles. "My description, more or less. And the number belonged to the Hertz car I rented at the airport. You also had people staked out to catch me meeting Scheldt. Only it wasn't me. Nobody turned up at that meeting."

Percy French pondered until a truck blasted him with its airhorns. "Perhaps you got cold feet at the last moment."

"Sure. And perhaps I never phoned MaxImp, never offered any material. Percy, I've been with Geowide nearly all my working life. I'm—I was—a good, loyal little wage-slave. What I'm supposed to have done never entered my head. If it had I would have dismissed it without thinking twice. It's just not me."

Steve tapped French's arm. "You're not happy about what's happened either! This morning you said I was a victim, didn't you?"

French snorted, his shrewd, faded eyes shy. "Oh, don't put too much stock in a mere jest, dear boy." He sighed heavily. "No, I'm not happy. What's my nickname, Bass? Gestapo French, I fancy. Because my business is minding other people's, from top to bottom, at Geowide. Mainly the top, however. I flatter myself I'm the watcher who sees most of the game. And you don't fit the game being played."

Steve watched the urban landscape changing. "Where are we going?"

"Thought I'd follow my nose," Percy French replied vaguely, obviously

untruthfully. His route was purposeful, heading northward across London. At this rate, Steve reckoned, they'd be in Hampstead soon.

Heated air made the Alvis's long, blotched hood shimmer. French had lowered the windshield after parking on a side street overlooking part of Hampstead Heath and a row of Edwardian mansions converted to apartments.

For five minutes, heavy binoculars resting on the frame of the windshield, he had snubbed or just ignored Steve's questions. Now he passed the binoculars. "Third house along. Something's about to happen—it happens most mornings. Watch, then tell me about it."

In a while Steve said, "Terry Raikes came out and opened the garage door. He moved another car out of the way, backed it up, and brought his own out. Then he put the first car back in, shut the garage and went to work."

French was in a splendid mood, humming under his breath as he started the Alvis. "What sort of car, laddie?"

"Ford Granada. Well, Terry's pretty high up in sales. That's the firm's car for his executive grade. No mystery."

"Chump. The other car, the one he had to move."

"Porsche, lovely thing." Steve blinked as the implication struck him. "But it can't be his, it must belong to another tenant."

"Not so, but otherwise," Percy French chanted. The vulture ruff of thin sandy hair behind his ears stirred in the slipstream. "Raikes acquired that double garage from the landlords six months ago. He drives the Porsche at nights and weekends. All company men have a secret life, old lad, that lasts from Friday night until Sunday night—they think. Our Mr. Raikes was fairly discreet, hiding the Porsche away, but you don't spend many thousands of pounds on a performance machine just to polish it once a week in concealment."

Steve felt no triumph and little hope. "You are saying Terry Raikes has a private, maybe illicit source of money."

"The car cost as much as he earned last year," French confirmed. "A month ago he announced he was taking his parents on a tour of the Lake District for his annual vacation. There was only one parent, and his mother appears to be twenty-three years old and a stunner. They must have been under the impression that the Lake District is in the South of France."

"I need a scapegoat, Percy, but it can't be Terry. He's a salesman—he

has no access to R and D. Very little anyway. You said yourself just now, John Coverdale's so secretive and security-conscious it's ridiculous. Terry Raikes couldn't have got at the power-cell data. It's not like stealing The Famous Secret Plans, Percy. Conan Doyle is dead. You'd need wide access over a longish period and the know-how to interpret what you were seeing."

Steve's voice tailed away. "You'd need to be me," he mumbled dejectedly.

"What an ego!" Percy French made the tires yelp as he cornered with élan. "Research and Development has some forty employees, my boy—not all as clever as you, but they can't all be idiots."

"Very comical. I just meant that Terry isn't your spy."

"Correct. I believe he's half of him. I was so keen on intercepting you I missed breakfast. Let's find a real, unpleasant transport caff, what used to be known as a Good Pull-Up for Carmen, and feast on bacon sandwiches and stewed tea."

After the meal, French patted his belly and beamed. "Most unhealthy, I'm sure, and absolutely scrumptious."

He lit a miniature cigar. "So, things march, as the French say. Did you know that Terry Raikes was at university with a friend of yours? Boon companions, though they hardly speak to each other at Geowide. Publicly, at least. In their college days, they nearly got sent down—an exam-rigging scandal, insufficient proof but much circumstantial evidence. By chance, that involved a form of espionage. One cousin sneaked into a don's room and copied tests, the other found fellow undergraduates who were dim but well off and sold the answers."

"Good Lord."

"Well might you say so. Terry Raikes's cousin is Bill Handel."

"Bill?"

"Just so." French smiled, but he didn't sound the least genial. "Miss, two more of those unspeakable teas, please."

"Two unspeakable teas coming up, Grampa."

Percy French paid the slattern. "Clever of you to slop almost as much into the saucers as stayed in the cups, my dear."

"Skill, innit? Cheeky old sod."

He watched her bounce back behind the counter. At this hour the

transport caff was empty apart from Percy and Steve. The tubby man leaned over the table.

"I'm inquisitive by nature and calling, I *like* casually glancing over a shoulder, pausing to catch one end of a phone chat, trying the occasional door marked Private. I do it very well. Oh, I'm something of a joke in the firm, Gestapo French and all that, but few people realize how, um, how *pervasive* the old boy is. Pervasive and tireless. 'Pon my soul, Bass, my feet ache at the end of a day. I'm forever prowling."

"Confession is good for the soul," Steve quoted sourly.

French frowned at him. "Just listen. You'll learn. Over the past few years I've become aware of a rival—your friend, Bill Handel. Two compulsive snoopers' paths are bound to cross.

"I misled you earlier. I didn't just happen to be near your office after you were escorted away yesterday. I'd noticed Handel drifting in and out while you were away."

"He'd leave me a note sometimes. Pub lunch dates, that sort of thing."

"Huh! It doesn't take twenty minutes to write a note. And London office etiquette decrees that a visitor to an empty office leaves the door open, not shut—and locked." French blew a smoke ring. "Bill Handel, you may be sure, read each of those letters as you tucked them away. He didn't borrow a key from Maintenance to open your desk yesterday afternoon—he picked the lock, as usual, leaving a few more of his trademark scratches."

Steve made a disgusted sound. "When I think of him pawing through my life— O.K., he's sick, a voyeur of some kind. That proves nothing."

"Bill Handel's a blackguard," Percy French corrected serenely. "He snoops on everybody, for profit, not pleasure. My idea is that he's always looking for levers as a blackmailer. Your colleague in Research and Development, Dr Allwent—"

"Cedric Allwent? He had a nervous breakdown from overwork."

"He tried to kill himself. He still refuses to say why. But not long before taking that overdose, Allwent spent days at a time in R and D's technical library, and was using the Xerox machine. Thanks to John Coverdale's routines, Dr Allwent's briefcase was searched whenever he left the library." French's thin lips drooped. "But there seems to have been a flaw in the procedures. Allwent could have smuggled out material and I'd give odds of ten to one he did. Handel discovered a weak link, which eventually snapped under pressure."

"Now hold on!" Steve lowered his voice abruptly as the slattern stirred beside the tea and coffee urns. "I'm caught red-handed trying to sell information, or so it seems. And suddenly you start pulling alternative suspects out of the hat. Handel, Raikes—why not any dozen other people? Are you trying some con trick on me?"

"Time to go." French waved to the slattern. "A Lucullan repast, madam!"

Easing the Alvis into the traffic stream on the Great North Road, French said, "It's a very big hat, my boy. I've been making it since late 1979. That's when Gordon Thorogood and I became aware of worrying leaks from R and D.

"Once I divined what Handel was up to, and found his connection to Raikes, well, it was all hazy but at least I knew where to look. You were always a likely target for Handel, so I kept a close eye on you. So vulnerable, don't you know—through your affair with Josie."

The highway was level but Steve felt the weightless queasiness of hurtling over a humpbacked bridge. "You knew about that before seeing the letters? *How?*"

"Um, Josie told me, actually. I've always had a soft spot for her. Intelligent gal too. She asked my advice. I temporized, but she'd won. She knew I'd probably find out so she spiked my guns by turning me into a reluctant accessory before the fact."

He glared at Steve. "Hey, I'm the old buffer who's supposed to be stuffy, lad! Don't get on your high horse. She did it to safeguard you, not herself. No, I don't condone adultery, but her husband's a fool and a brute. I wouldn't deny her a chance."

"It's not that. I'm just grasping that something I thought very private—We might as well have put an ad in the *Times*."

"No doubt." French hastened to change the subject. "That flaw in Coverdale's security system was the girl in Photocopying at R and D. I can't be everywhere at once so I missed the significance. Terry Raikes suddenly took a strong interest in her, they started living together. A sad girl, not attractive.

"We questioned her and she became hysterical. Next morning we got a lawyer's letter and a medical certificate. She was ill, had to rest, and resigned. Somebody paid for her to go abroad." French grinned wryly.

"Geowide paid, since it was done out of profits made by selling company property.

"However, she'll have to return sooner or later and we'll keep up tactful and legal but unrelenting pressure when she does. Handel and Raikes knew that, so they decided it was time to throw somebody off the sledge."

French overtook a truck, just, and concentrated on the road for a while.

"Raikes has contacts in the industry globally—he finds the customers, traveling to them at our expense. But Handel's the clever one. By gum, he knows the way people tick!"

"How so?"

"You so, old chap. Let's say Handel came to you—only it'd probably be a front man posing as the real blackmailer. 'Pass me all the power-cell data or I'll tell Josie's husband about the pair of you.' How would you react?"

Steve chewed his knuckle. "I don't know. Talk to Josie, naturally. I suppose— No, the information's not mine to give. I'd have to refuse."

"Exactly," French crowed, "and Handel guessed it. That's why he kept you for later and went after wretched Dr. Allwent instead. But when he needed—what's the Yanks' term?—a fall guy, *then* he could blackmail you into playing his game without having to voice his demand or expose himself. He simply set you up, gambling that concern for Josie would force you into docility. You weren't paying him with Geowide property, just your own career."

"Just!"

Clearing his throat, French said crossly, "I'm not going to commend you on being noble. It was the least you could do. Considerably more than some men might, though."

"I don't get it. You were sure I hadn't done it, but you let Sir Gordon call me all the names under the sun and kick me out."

"Gordon's young and headstrong," French countered, as only a man rising sixty can speak of a stripling ten years younger, "and he's no actor. I've been keeping him in the dark. I want Handel and Raikes to be soothed and reassured. They gambled that with a palpable culprit we'd assume the espionage was over and not bother to chase the girl, who was virtually bound to crack in the end and admit her part—not to mention her partners."

"Why tell me at all then? I should think you'd get a kick out of picturing me pumping gas or filling shelves at a supermarket."

"Don't be an idiot, Bass. Self-pity doesn't become you." French stopped the big car with a jolt. "You get out here. Tube station across the road, fifty-minute journey to your digs."

Steve shook his head. "There's more, and you'll tell me."

"Of course there's more, you chump! Your sacking was confidential, like what you're pleased to call your drumhead court martial. But the news will get out, in distorted form. Josie will get to know of it through her husband, if you don't tell her first. She, being Josie, will lose her head and storm in to Gordon Thorogood. Confessing. All in full dramatic flow, explaining that you couldn't have phoned anyone in Brussels or planned to meet them, because you were tucked up in some hotel room the entire time."

"We drove around," Steve amended sulkily.

"Whatever. The fat would be in the fire, that's the point. Gordon would reinstate you immediately; but adultery with one of his senior officers' Mem Sahibs not being in the regimental spirit he'd give you a whacking great *ex gratia* payment and suggest you go off to the Colonies to redeem yourself. Either way, the news would percolate and Handel and Raikes would stop their activities instead of suspending them and then carrying on with even greater slyness and caution."

Percy French took Steve's arm and shook it gently. "You must impress on her to keep her mouth shut until I'm ready. I want Handel, I want Raikes, I want this—vampirism that's bleeding the firm's life away eradicated."

Steve got out of the Alvis. "Right. But how long will it take for you to be ready, Percy? I've got friends in R and D, I want their respect back. The way John Coverdale looked at me when I came out of old Thorogood's suite, yesterday—"

"About a week, thanks to you." French was smug.

"I've told you nothing you didn't know!"

"Think again. After MaxImp alerted us to the initial approach—it wasn't chance that picked MaxImp, Raikes selected the company most likely to denounce a seller—we interviewed all senior staff, including Handel and Raikes. We also inspected passports, using a cover story about new documentation for the computer."

French chortled, rubbing his hands.

"Raikes claimed to have been at home all that week nursing the flu."

He had a medical certificate to prove it, incidentally—they must have access to tame doctors.

“His passport showed no recent trips abroad, certainly not to Germany or Belgium this month.

“Hindsight tells us Raikes must have flown to Frankfurt to make that first call to MaxImp implicating you.

“Then he went to Brussels, following you, so he could learn your hire-car number and really tie the can to your tail.

“The passport part was easy to work. If you’re a bona fide businessman the Foreign Office allows you two passports, one for use in Arab countries refusing visas to anyone with Israeli visa stamps. It won’t take long to establish that Mr. Raikes has been issued a second one, recording visits to Germany and Belgium at the relevant times.”

Reading Steve’s expression, French said, “You still don’t get it? You caught Raikes in a thundering lie. That’s why I was startled when you told me he’d seen you in Brussels. He wasn’t pretending not to see you, dear boy. He was praying you hadn’t seen him. Hanging about to learn your hire car number, he got too close.” He shivered theatrically. “And I could have missed that so easily. Oh, I’d have got them, but not for months yet.”

Steve was getting back into the car. “They’ll break right now, you needn’t pin down the second passport thing. Come on, Percy, let’s barge in on Terry Raikes and make him sweat!”

The old man frowned thoughtfully. “No, not Raikes. Our Mr. Handel, he’ll understand it’s all over except for the detailed proof, and he’ll try to save himself at Raikes’s expense. Raikes in turn will be infuriated at Handel acting the knave and try to drag him down. Splendidly symmetrical!”

Sir Gordon Thorogood’s autograph, above that of the company secretary and another director, looked good to Steve Bass. The typed figures on the check eclipsed their appeal though.

Percy French fell into step as Steve headed for the lifts. “How was our distinguished warrior?”

“In a generous mood.” Steve was terse.

French cocked an eye at him. “Still time to change your mind. Gordon knows nothing of the—the love interest. John Coverdale threw a terrible tantrum at that special meeting last week when Gordon had to admit he’d

cashiered and flogged the wrong chap. Coverdale's talking resignation if you're not welcomed back to R and D with a substantial salary increase and the title of Deputy Supervisor. You could be on the Board in a year." Percy French was an honest man. "Well, three years then—Gordon distrusts changes, especially at Coverdale's pistol-point."

"The Board or the rack?" Steve pressed the Down button. "That nightmare taught me two lessons. You're the nosiest old codger in the City of London, and I'm not a company man."

Percy French nodded resignedly. "So be it. What will you do?"

"I've an uncle in Canada who owns a small hotel. He wants an injection of capital and somebody to take over the place when he retires."

French planted his foot against the lift door. "What about the love interest? None of my business—"

"You've never let that deter you before. The love interest is fine. By the time she's free I'll have something solid for her to share. Goodbye, Percy. Thanks—I think."

Percy French simpered, little spectacles askew. "I won't ask you to keep in touch—because I'll still have an eye on you. A friendly one, in case you fall among thieves. Not for the first time."

"No way, Percy. I'm getting clear of all you snoopers, good, bad, and indifferent."

French took his foot away and the door closed.

Long after the wedding, when Steve had been away from London for so long he believed he might lose his way in Soho or Chelsea if dumped there by magic carpet, the jeep struggled up through the snow from the general store, bringing mail as well as provisions.

Josie brought the package in—battered, ripped at one corner, not large yet fairly heavy. Puzzling over the postmark date she said, "Surface mail takes an age, darling. Imagine! This was sent the week we got married!"

Steve cut string and slit cardboard. The object was silver, a pleasant slotted curve ending in four knobbed feet. "It's for toast, I suppose," said Josie while he scrabbled for the card.

Reading it, he chuckled reluctantly, though his eyes were stinging.

"I couldn't think of an original wedding present, but then I remembered you saying something about a rack. Felicitations to you both. The Snoop."

Albert's body had been discovered under the stands at the stadium . . .

THE RETURN OF CARDULA

by
JACK
RITCHIE



“Albert’s last words were ‘No snow.’”

I frowned thoughtfully. People do seem to babble the oddest things when they depart this world. Especially murder victims. “What were the weather conditions at the time of Albert’s death?” I asked.

“The temperature was in the low seventies. You couldn’t *buy* snow on a night like that.”

Which reminded me. “Now be utterly honest with me, sir. In the

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vernacular of the underworld, snow often refers to drugs of one kind or another. Were you and Albert by any chance involved in drugs?"

His expression indicated that he was clearly above that sort of thing. "We wouldn't touch anything that heavy. We were just ordinary thieves."

I had arrived at my office at nine P.M.

I closed the window against the night air, hung up my cape, and proceeded to unlock the door to my waiting room.

I found a client already seated there. I always leave the door between my waiting room and the hall unlocked. He seemed startled to see me. "Were you inside there all the time?"

I smiled economically. "Have you been out here long?"

"About twenty minutes."

He was a small man of middle years with blinking eyes and a nervous manner. He studied me dubiously, as people have a tendency to do when they first meet me. "Are you Cárduła?"

"Yes." I showed him into my office and offered him a chair.

He sat down. "I finally couldn't stand it any longer. I decided that I ought to see a private detective and find out what could be done. I was going to go the first thing tomorrow morning, but when I looked up names in the phone book I saw that your display ad said Night Hours, so I decided to come here right away and get it over with." He hesitated. "Is a private eye something like a priest or a lawyer? I mean if you tell him something does he keep it to himself?"

"Sir, I assure you that anything you have to tell me will travel no further."

That satisfied him. "My name is Walter Pierce. I'd like you to solve a murder."

"Sir," I said, "I do not wish to discourage business, but the regular police possess the numbers, the expertise, and the communications needed to handle matters as grave as murder. Contrary to popular belief, private detectives rarely, if ever, deal with murder."

"But the police still haven't found the murderer and I don't think they ever will."

"When did this murder occur?"

"About two months ago."

"And the victim?"

"Albert Marshall. Albert and me were partners. We were together for

more than thirty years. In jail and out. Mostly in. We'd get caught together, serve time together, and get paroled together."

Naturally I wanted to hear more about that. "Jail?"

He nodded. "The fact of the matter is that Albert and me were thieves. Mostly burglary, but also whatever else came along. That's why we were at the ball park. Not to see the game—we never even read the sports pages of the newspapers—but to go through the locker rooms while the players were out on the field. You know, scoop up anything we could lay our hands on—watches, wallets, rings, anything that looked valuable."

"Wouldn't you expect to find somebody in the rooms watching the players' possessions?"

"Sometimes there'd be somebody there and sometimes not. Whenever we found anybody, we'd just pretend we were lost and walk out again."

He rubbed his jaw. "Well, this time we did things a little different because of the layout. There was this long low corridor, like a tunnel, under the stands leading to the locker rooms and it made a turn. If we both went in there and something happened that we didn't expect we could get trapped. So we decided that one of us would stay at the entrance, like a lookout, and the other would go inside and do the job. If anybody showed up while Albert was at work, I'd stall him long enough so Albert could finish up inside and get out of there."

Pierce sighed. "So I stood there and watched Albert disappear down the corridor. And two minutes later I saw Albert again—only this time he had one hand tight against his chest and he was staggering. He came back up to me, his eyes wide, and said, 'No snow.' Then he dropped dead at my feet.

"At first I thought it was a heart attack, but then I saw the hole in his chest. There wasn't much blood—just around the edges of the wound and on Albert's hand. What I figure happened is that somebody was there in the locker room, only Albert didn't know it. When he saw Albert going through the lockers collecting, this unknown person grabbed a gun and fired."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No. Where I was standing the noise from the fans must have drowned it out. So there I was with Albert's body, but I couldn't go to the police because I hadn't reported to my parole officer for over a year and that could get me into a lot of trouble. So I just had to leave Albert lying there and let somebody else find his body."

Pierce shook his head sadly. "Albert was even smaller than I am and weighed ten pounds less. You could have said boo and Albert would have dropped everything and run like a rabbit. There wasn't no cause to shoot him."

Now I vaguely remembered reading a newspaper item about the body of a man being found in a corridor under the stands at the County Stadium. The police had speculated that he might have been the victim of a robbery attempt that went awry.

I reflected. "If Albert was shot by someone in the locker room, why didn't that person come forward and admit as much? I don't remember reading anything to that effect in the newspapers."

Pierce smiled thinly. "Nobody ever came forward. Whoever shot Albert wasn't too proud of what he'd done. Maybe because it was really murder. I was hoping the police would find him, but since that doesn't look likely any more I decided to come to you and see if anything can be done about it."

"Whose locker room had Albert been rifling? The home team's or the visitors'?"

"The home team. If everything went right we were going to go through the visitors' next."

When Pierce left, I pondered. Who had killed Albert? A locker-room attendant? Or perhaps even a player who had lagged behind for some reason? A visit to the stadium might be in order.

I found the evening's newspaper in the waiting room and turned to the sports pages. Ah, good, there was a game tonight.

It was approximately four miles to the County Stadium—as the crow flies, so to speak—and when I arrived I descended to a dark spot behind the last seats in the upper grandstand.

I studied the playing field far below. Even with my ultra-keen eyesight I could barely distinguish the numbers on the backs of the players. Clearly I had to get a better view.

I strode down the ramp to the lower grandstand and then down the aisle to the box seats near the diamond. I found two empty seats and took one of them, which gave me an excellent close view of the players. I purchased a score card and settled down to observe. A beer vendor passed and I was sorely tempted—however, I am on a strict high-protein diet.

I am by no means a baseball aficionado—however, I am not totally

ignorant of the game. I have, through occasional video viewing, natural curiosity, and longevity, acquired at least a working knowledge of the game and even recognition of certain of the more important individuals in the sport.

From the scoreboard in left field, I learned that I had entered the stadium in the last half of the sixth inning. The home team led the Yankees, 4 to 2, and was at bat. There were two outs, Gary on first base, and Seiler at bat.

I noticed that I was drawing some attention from those seated about me. Perhaps I should have worn one of my sports jackets rather than the red-lined cape.

Seiler walked on four pitched balls, putting men on first and second. Monson stepped into the batter's box and swung at the first pitch. He sent a fly-ball to Winfield, the Yankee left fielder, and that ended the inning.

I now became aware of a middle-aged couple standing in the aisle glowering at me. They remained thus for a few moments more and then departed. However, they soon returned, this time accompanied by an usher.

He regarded me sternly. "Are you sure you got the right seat, mister? These people think you're in one of theirs and they got the ticket stubs to prove it."

The pair nodded confirmation and held up their stubs. "We had car trouble and just got here," the man said.

I managed to look perplexed. "Isn't this Section Eight?"

Obviously it was not and the usher said, "Nope."

I rose immediately. "My apologies, madam and sir. I seem to have made an error."

I left them and wandered up and down the aisles until I found another vacant seat in Section Five.

The Yankees went down one-two-three in the top half of the seventh.

I now found the same usher who had accosted me before at my side. This time he was accompanied by a policeman.

The usher spoke. "I been watching you, mister. This ain't Section Eight either."

I blinked surprise. "It isn't?"

"No. Let's see your ticket stub. If you paid to get in here, you got a ticket stub."

I searched several of my pockets and then chuckled. "I seem to have lost my stub. It was here just a moment ago." Then I appealed to his reason. "Oh, well, what difference does it really make *which* seat I take? As long as it was empty."

The policeman took the opposite view. "Mister, no stub, no seat." He took me by the arm and began escorting me to the exit.

I could, of course, have tossed him, the usher, and several dozen of the interested spectators to the winds, but I detest being the center of attention. It brings a blush to my cheeks, which can be quite a strain.

The policeman guided me all the way down the exit ramp and out of the stadium before he released his hold.

"For shame, mister. You look like you got money and still you sneak into the stadium."

When he disappeared, I walked to the ticket windows only to discover that they were all closed. Nevertheless, I reentered the stadium, this time finding a place under the roof of the upper grandstand.

The score was still 4 to 2 and remained that way as the inning ended. The Yankees trotted in for their turn at the plate and our team took the field. I watched our pitcher, a young left hander, wind up and throw the first ball of the eighth inning. A perfect strike.

Then I blinked and nearly lost my grip on the rafter.

I stared at the pitcher as he threw a slider for strike two.

So *that* was it.

In the top half of the ninth, Piniella hit a home run for the Yankees with nobody on, but it wasn't enough and they lost the game 4 to 3.

After the game I remained in the area waiting for the players to show, change to mufti, and exit.

When they did, some of them went to private automobiles in the parking lot and others to the team bus.

I followed the bus closely as it made its way out of the lot and onto the freeway. It took the team back downtown and debarked them at the Atkinson Hotel.

I managed to be in the same elevator which took Monson, the pitcher, up to the twelfth floor. When he unlocked the door of his room, I shouldered in before he could close it again. He backed up, startled. "Who are you?"

I proffered my card and he glanced at it without touching. I smiled. "I am here to see that justice is done."

He swallowed. "Justice? What justice?"

"Oh, come now, sir. You know perfectly well that I am referring to the murder of one Albert Marshall on an evening two months ago at the County Stadium."

His face paled.

I was rather proud of my deductions and now I proceeded to expound. "Let me refresh your memory, sir. On that night two months ago, you were pitching. However, you were not at your best. You were shelled from the mound and sent to the showers. Being sent to the showers can be interpreted literally or figuratively, depending upon the manager of a team. And your manager was literal. You descended into the bowels of the stadium to the locker room. You removed your uniform.

"I deduce that you had just finished your shower and were still in the shower room toweling yourself when Albert Marshall entered the adjoining locker room, his mission being to pilfer anything portable. If you had been still showering, Marshall would have heard the water running and fled immediately.

"As you reentered the locker room you saw Marshall at work. You sneaked to your locker, removed a pistol from therein, made your presence known, and shot him."

Monson sank slowly into a chair.

I smiled grimly. "Marshall was sorely wounded, but still had the strength to flee. And then suddenly the full realization of what you had done struck you. Even if the man was a thief caught in the act, why does a six-foot-three-inch two-hundred-pound man in the prime of life find it necessary to use a weapon against a middle-aged five-foot thief? It might possibly even be considered murder. You could get into real trouble if you admitted the shooting. So you decided to say nothing at all."

Monson sighed heavily and shook his head. "No. It wasn't like that. It was an accident. The gun didn't even belong to me. It's Seiler's. He has the locker next to mine and he collects guns. He just bought that one for his collection. I didn't know it was loaded and I never held a pistol before in my life. I was just going to point the gun, but I guess it had a hair trigger or maybe I was just too nervous and it went off.

"I was really stunned when it happened. I just stood there, not knowing what to do or think when he staggered out. I was still in shock when the

team came in after the game. And then I learned that he was dead and the police thought he was the victim of a holdup attempt."

Monson looked me full in the eye. "I was going to go to the police and tell them what happened, but then all kinds of other thoughts came to my mind. Like this is my first year in the majors and we're pennant contenders. And all my life I dreamed about pitching in a World Series. So I finally decided I'd say nothing until the end of the season or the World Series, whichever came last. And *then* I'd go to the police and be ready to go to jail, if that was in the cards. But now that you know what happened, I guess I'd better go to the police right now."

I thought over his words. "You say the team is a pennant contender?"

He nodded. "With any luck at all, we'll make it."

I pondered a bit more, pacing back and forth a few times while he watched. Then I came to a decision. "Well, perhaps it won't do any actual harm if you waited until the end of the season or the World Series."

He brightened. "You really think so?"

"You have my permission."

The next evening, I was waiting in my office when Pierce appeared.

He listened while I related the previous night's events and then became reflective. "You really think he'll go to the police after the World Series?"

"Yes, I believe so. He seemed quite sincere to me. I think we can trust him," I said.

"How old is he?"

"I'd guess about twenty-one or -two."

Pierce mulled a bit more. "Well, if it had been murder, like I thought, that would be one thing. But if it was an accident, I can't see what good it will do for the kid to report to the police. I mean it can't do Albert any good. He's dead. And Monson is still a young man. He could ruin his whole life and career. Maybe he should just keep his mouth shut forever and let sleeping dogs lie."

I smiled. "My sentiments exactly. I will speak to him again."

Pierce now asked the question for which I had been waiting. "How did you manage to pinpoint Monson? After all, there are a lot of other players who could have done it."

I chuckled. "When Monson undressed for the showers, I suspect that he tossed, flung, or otherwise draped his uniform shirt over the edge of his open locker door. The name Monson in lower case *and* upside down,

means nothing. However, in upper case—as it appeared on his uniform—and upside down, it becomes NOSNOW.

“As you said, Albert knew absolutely nothing about baseball or he might have recognized Monson. But all he saw was someone standing next to a uniform shirt which carried the letters NOSNOW. As far as Albert was concerned, that could very well have been the player’s name. When he conveyed that information to you, he chose to pronounce it ‘No snow,’ which is as reasonably as any.”

After Pierce left, I locked the office and went off to the County Stadium. This time I wore my sports jacket and bought a ticket.

We beat the Yankees again, 6 to 1.

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DB214-2

Dillon was zeroing in on Hernandez

CARLOS' PERFECT CRIME

by
FRANKLIN
BANDY



Detective Jack Dillon left the scene of the crime shaking his head. Man chops up wife with ax. A real tough one to solve. How did he get himself into homicide anyway?

With some pride, he remembered the case five years ago that had boosted him from rookie cop to homicide detective. Now *that* was a real case to solve. The press played it up day after day right through the trial. After all, how often does a Siamese twin get murdered?

It was the summer of 1975. The year before, he had graduated from City College, taken his examination, and followed his father into the Department.

Dressed in worn old jeans, T-shirt, and faded summer-weight jacket, he boarded a subway to take him to his new assignment. He carried a battered, cheap suitcase. In his new territory he would also be less noticeable with a day's stubble on his long thin face. Just another hard-up dude squeezing his last five dollars.

The subject of his investigation lived on a street lined with torn, overdue-for-collection garbage bags. Decaying old buildings hugged the littered sidewalk. Dillon passed Rosa's Bodega, Pedro's Cantina, and various hole-in-the-wall shops, many with no signs. One of these was a tiny three-stool restaurant. His assignment was to rent a room in, or near, Francisco Hernandez's building; his object was surveillance, and the hope he could get to know Hernandez.

Hernandez was a wholesaler. He sold heroin, pot, coke, and anything he could buy and mark up one thousand percent. The Narcotics Division knew everything about Hernandez except the one important fact, where he warehoused and sold his goods. They could never catch him buying, cutting, or selling.

The building was a five-story walkup of brick held together precariously by crumbling mortar. Dillon waded through a covey of small brown children screaming at each other, went down the steps to the basement door, and knocked. After a short wait, the door opened about three inches, the length of the chain lock.

"What you want?" Part of a woman's face, dimly visible, peered at him.

"You the super?"

"Si."

"I'm looking to rent a room. Would you know if anyone in the building would like to rent one?" He spoke in Spanish.

He could see motion indicating the shaking of a head. "No room." The door started to close.

"Wait," he said, his voice louder. He held a five-dollar bill in front of the crack. "For you if you help me find a room."

A plump hand emerged and grasped the bill. "You speak like an educated man," she said in Spanish. "I will help you."

The chain was removed and the door opened. The super scrutinized him carefully, her glance moving from his head to his toes and back. She

was fat but had a pleasant round face only slightly marred by some straggly black chin-hairs.

"I am an educated woman," she said, "I am a graduate of the high school of the Convent of the Holy Mother and I can tell that though you are a Yanqui you learned your Spanish from a good teacher."

"*Gracias*. I have worked hard at speaking correctly."

She was wearing a shapeless grey coverall, which accommodated her corpulence by being several sizes too large. The pants legs were turned up about six inches. She stepped out into the areaway, tucked a key ring into one of the big patch pockets, and closed her door.

"The twins have told me they will rent their extra bedroom if a proper, personable man should come looking. They become bored with each other, bound as they are."

She edged past him, smiling, and waddled up the steps, her huge buttocks quivering under the coarse material.

By the time they reached the third floor she was panting and leaned against the wall for a moment to recover. When she could breathe normally, she rapped briskly on the door, calling out, "It is I, Consuela."

The apartment door opened wide and two young men stood facing them. At first glance they appeared to be creatures from a horror movie. They had milky-white faces and hair of almost the same shade, and stared at him with pink eyes. They stood unnaturally close together as though bound by some awkward fastening.

After the immediate shock, Dillon realized they were not only albinos, they were Siamese twins.

They were dressed in beltless white slacks and white shirts open at the neck, both almost the color of their skin and hair. The only contrast was offered by four pink eyes. Their garments were hand-tailored to accommodate a bond that appeared to extend from waist to slightly below the armpits. Meeting them in the dark would be a frightening experience.

Consuela said, "This is Carlos and Ramon. Carlos is on the right and Ramon is on the left. And your name, señor?"

"Rogers. Walter Rogers," said Dillon.

She spoke English to Carlos. "Señor Rogers will rent room. He is educated gentleman. You will like him. I like him."

The twins swung away from the door with movements that were crablike but smooth and coordinated. They had had thirty years to perfect them.

In English Carlos said, "Please come in." Then, as Dillon entered, he stared suspiciously at his unshaven face.

"Are you a clean person? Do you bathe every day? We are clean people. As you can see, we were born clean, with no pigment in our skins. You can also see that we are freaks. This, too, is an accident of genetics."

Dillon smiled, "Yes, I shower every day. I usually shave too."

Carlos nodded. "Good. I am glad you are not offended by my question. Cleanliness is important when one is down on one's luck and must live in a slum."

Consuela, who had been listening and apparently only half understanding the English, said, "Is not a slum."

"What would you call it?"

"Not a slum." Consuela left, slamming the door.

Carlos turned to Dillon. "You have income to pay rent? You are employed?"

"Well, actually I'm unemployed, but I'm receiving unemployment payments of over a hundred a week."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a school psychologist. A guidance counselor."

Carlos shook his head sadly. "Ah, yes, I know there is much unemployment in the schools. However, we are not a charitable organization. The rent for your room will be one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. In advance."

"No problem."

Carlos turned and gestured. "Then I suggest you look over our humble abode and see whether it suits your needs."

Happy to have lucked into the same building with Hernandez, Dillon glanced around at the small living room. Bookshelves packed to overflowing dominated most of the wall space. Two windows opened onto an airshaft. There was a large sofa upholstered in green Naugahyde, two similarly upholstered chairs, a coffee table of dark wood, a color television set, and, next to the windows, a large dropleaf table flanked by two straight chairs which was probably used for dining. Wall-to-wall carpeting of muted green covered the floor.

"You two must do a great deal of reading," said Dillon.

Carlos frowned. "I do a great deal of reading. My brother finds his intellectual stimulation watching the cartoons on TV."

Ramon pouted. "I watch a lot of other things on television besides the cartoons. I watch the news—I am very well informed about the world."

Dillon noticed a set of padded earphones on the sofa facing the television set. So Ramon listened in silence while Carlos read.

Carlos said, "You may share the kitchen if you are considerate and buy your own food."

"Thank you."

They moved in the direction of the bedrooms. The spare room was small and contained a twin-size bed, a dresser, a straight chair, a reading lamp, and a large wardrobe which served as a closet. An oval-shaped hooked rug in bright colors was the only floor covering. A single window looked out on the same airshaft. The room was clean.

Dillon said, "It looks O.K. to me." He reached for his wallet and found five twenties, two tens and a five.

Carlos accepted the bills, nodding. Then the twins crab-walked their way back to the living room, Dillon following.

Carlos said, "We were about to have some coffee. Will you join us in a cup?"

"Thanks," Dillon said. "I'll be glad to."

Over coffee, Dillon learned that the twins had been born in Mexico, offspring of a Mexican father and a German mother. The mother died shortly after their birth and the father emigrated to the United States, getting a job as a carpenter and general handyman with a traveling carnival. The seven-hundred-pound fat lady babysat with the twins while he worked. When the show was open, the twins occupied a tent on freak row. Clad only in diapers, they entertained the curious from an oversized playpen. Some of the kindlier viewers came back for a second visit and brought them toys.

Later their father married one of the exotic dancers, forcing the babysitting chore on his new bride. She found it a nuisance, but had to admit the little wretches paid their own way. The carnival owner gave their father a percentage of the twins' gate and some weeks it was almost as much as his salary and his new wife's combined.

When the twins were seven, the law stepped in. They weren't receiving a proper education and their life style constituted a cruel abuse of children. Pressure on the carnival owner and on their father succeeded in effecting their removal to a Catholic orphanage where they began a more normal

life of school, prayer, and such games as they could play. They became particularly adept at handball, Carlos using his left hand and Ramon his right.

Carlos learned quickly and was an omnivorous reader. Ramon was poorly motivated and had a difficult time learning anything. To this day he could barely read, Carlos said.

"I can read quite well," Ramon interrupted angrily. He put on his earphones and turned on the television set.

Dillon and Carlos continued to talk, occasionally glancing at the silent picture as the characters in a soap opera mouthed their lines.

Carlos completed his college accounting courses at age nineteen, received his bachelor's degree, and took the state C.P.A. examination, passing it with a spectacularly high grade. He was one of the youngest ever to achieve this honor. "And this numbskull," said Carlos, pointing to his brother, "almost got me disqualified. He got bored and uncomfortable and sat there mumbling and whispering the whole time. The examiners were certain he was helping me."

Dillon smiled.

"Thanks to Father Sullivan's help and an hour the examiners spent interrogating Ramon, they came to the correct conclusion that he could hardly add four plus four much less help me pass a C.P.A. exam."

Dillon said, "So all turned out well."

"All turned out lousy. Who wants to hire a C.P.A. who has to carry a human appendage around who sits all day mumbling and bending paper clips out of shape?"

The twins drifted back into carnival work. But people weren't all that interested in Siamese twins any more. The twins had to jazz up their act by playing handball matches and doing simple acrobatics. They even tried reading tea leaves.

Dillon said, "It's too bad you haven't been able to have one of those operations to separate you. Is it too dangerous in your particular case?"

"When we were children it was considered so. Now medicine has progressed. Surgeons estimate we'd have a ninety percent chance of surviving."

Ramon took off his earphones.

"I'd be willing to risk an operation, but Ramon is afraid and they won't do it unless both parties consent."

Ramon said, "I'll never consent. Carlos is going to kill me anyway, and then we'll both die."

Carlos gave Ramon a long, speculative look. "My own brother! How can you say such a thing?"

Ramon turned to Dillon. "You'll see. He's planning to kill me."

Carlos turned away, studying the books on the shelves. "My brother is a bit paranoid. I would like very much to be separated and live a normal life, but—"

Ramon said, "Anyway, we have no money. An operation like that costs thousands. Maybe even fifty thousand."

Carlos picked up his coffee mug. "One of those hotshot surgeons would do it for the publicity. And Uncle Frank told me he'd help with the expenses."

Dillon smiled. "You have a rich uncle?"

Carlos shook his head. "He isn't really our uncle. He's part owner of the carnival where we eke out a subsistence living. But he's loaded. He has business interests other than the carnival."

Ramon fiddled with his padded earphones. "He likes us. We bring him luck. He even helps us over the winter when we have no work. He lives upstairs."

Dillon sat up a little straighter. Frank? Francisco? What luck if Uncle Frank was Francisco Hernandez!

Ramon giggled. "Uncle Frank's ashamed of being associated with the carnival. He wears a wig and sunglasses when he goes over there."

Carlos slapped the lower part of Ramon's face, not too hard. "Will you shut your stupid mouth!"

Dillon pretended embarrassment, but was secretly elated. If Francisco went to the carnival disguised, perhaps the carnival was his hideout for storage and distribution. It would be ideal—plenty of people coming and going. However, he doubted that the wig and sunglasses would fool the stakeouts that must have monitored Hernandez. Unless he had some secret way of leaving.

Carlos said, "Please excuse my bad temper. Uncle Frank is very touchy about his little game. You'd be wise to keep your mouth shut about this. Uncle Frank is a hard man when crossed. You could end up in the hospital with two smashed kneecaps."

Dillon tried to look properly frightened. "I won't mention it to anyone," he promised. He rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully. "Do you suppose

he might give me a job at the carnival? Roustabout work? Anything. I'm pretty strong."

Ramon, who had been working his mouth angrily, said, "Don't you ever do that to me again, Carlos. I'll spit in your face."

Carlos ignored Ramon. "I don't know about the job. We could ask."

"It was just a thought." Dillon stood up and stretched. "I guess I'll unpack and go out and buy a few supplies. Maybe I'll stop by and catch your act at the carnival tonight."

Carlos turned his mouth down. "Stay away from the three-card Monte dealers."

Having ridden patrol in the area frequently, Dillon knew the location of the Great Galaxy Carnival. It occupied two vacant blocks on Hollisberg Avenue near Blaisford, only a short distance from his new lodging. Unarmed except for a switchblade knife, and carrying no identification, he walked the dark streets with alert caution, keeping close to the curb. Occasionally he crossed the street when he saw groups of young loungers clustered around a street light.

The bright glitter of the carnival grounds brought a sigh of relief. Gangs could play very rough in this part of the city.

Aside from its Hispanic overtones, the midway was similar to every other carnival Dillon had seen. The slowly spinning Ferris wheel, cotton candy, enchiladas, tacos, Double-X beer, baseballs to throw at stuffed animals and dolls, .22-caliber rifles chained to the counter at the shooting gallery, fortune tellers, tent shows—10 EROTIC, EXOTIC DANCERS 10—freak row with the fat lady, the goat man, the human blob, the sword swallower, the Siamese twins. There were fun rides to swing people up, down, and around.

There were games of chance, including one he'd never seen before. It consisted of an oversized roulette wheel with holes opposite each number. Live mice substituted for the roulette ball. While the wheel was spinning a mouse would be dropped in the center. Frightened by the lights and noise, or perhaps aware that food was downstairs, the mouse would scamper quickly into one of the holes, providing the winning number. Dillon watched, fascinated, wondering how the game could be fixed.

Strolling around like any ordinary sucker, he paused occasionally, pretending to watch a three-card Monte game. How would he handle distribution to his dealers if he were Hernandez? The place was crowded

with families, averaging at least three children per couple. Perhaps in one of the fortune tellers' tents? He'd need to give the carnival a lot more attention. Maybe reinforcements should be called to infiltrate? He wasn't even certain Uncle Frank was Francisco Hernandez, but it seemed a fair assumption.

The Siamese twins' tent was not drawing much of a gate. Dillon paid his two dollars and was admitted. Inside, the tent was larger than it appeared from the midway. A row of bleachers occupied the end near the door. The stage, if one could call it that, was a small handball court with the playing wall at the rear. Six spectators were seated in the bleachers.

The twins were clad only in yellow and blue striped shorts so that the curious could look at the white band of flesh that held them together. They were performing a handstand. A quick acrobatic flip brought them to their feet. They bowed to no applause. Undaunted, Carlos made a brief speech urging one of the spectators to come forward for a handball game. The prize for winning was a selection from the rack. Dillon glanced at the shelves containing boxes of candy, clocks, dolls, and other carnival booty.

The spectators sat immobile, resigned looks predominating. They had blown two dollars on a dud, but were reluctant to leave. Something might happen.

Carlos spotted Dillon. Half dragging Ramon with him, he crabbed his way quickly up to him. "Now here's a young man who will give us a tough game, I know, and win one of these fantastic prizes," he said loudly. Grasping Dillon's arm, he whispered, "For God's sake, play with us. This evening has been hell. We're *dying*."

Dillon, who hadn't played handball in years, accepted the glove Carlos offered him and stepped onto the court. To his surprise, he performed reasonably well. The twins had the advantage of reach and ambidexterity, Carlos playing the left side and Ramon the right. But Dillon could, of course, get around the court faster. He lost the first game 21 to 16 and the second 21 to 20. Several more spectators had arrived and interest in the play became lively, some rooting for Dillon and others for the twins. After the second game, Carlos had no trouble getting a new volunteer from the stands. He thanked Dillon warmly.

Dillon waved away his thanks and strolled off to a food concession where he ate tamales, enchiladas, and tacos, and drank two bottles of

beer. Then he hailed a battered taxi, locked both doors, and rode back to his new home in comparative safety.

He was deep in sleep when he was awakened by a sharp rapping on the wall of the adjoining bedroom. He wondered sleepily whether it concerned him, but as the rapping grew louder he rolled out of bed and hurried to the twins' room.

It was dimly lit by a bedside lamp. The twins were lying on the large double bed clad only in pajama bottoms. Carlos was holding a long ruler. He dropped it limply when he saw Dillon. Ramon seemed to be unconscious and struggling to breathe. "We are ill," Carlos whispered, "I think we are dying. Call 911."

Dillon grabbed the phone on the table and dialed. He gave the information quickly, then turned back to the twins. Which one should he tackle first?

As though reading his mind, Carlos, hardly audible, said, "If you've had CPR—my brother—he's worse off." He gasped, then sighed. "Feel my body. Cold as ice."

Dillon put his hand on Carlos' chest. It was indeed a block of ice. The room, hot and stuffy, was at least ninety degrees. He began cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Ramon, who was unconscious and obviously closer to death than Carlos.

In six minutes the medics arrived and took over. After Ramon's pulse, though faint, was stabilized, the doctor instructing them by radio advised them to rush the twins to the hospital.

In his almost inaudible voice, Carlos said, "Take us Fahnstock Memorial. They know—about—Siamese twins."

The stretcher the medics had brought was useless. The three men somehow managed to carry the twins down the stairs and into the ambulance.

Dawn light was seeping into the apartment when Dillon returned. Too many cigarettes and cups of coffee during the long wait in the hospital had parched his throat and set his nerves on edge. He found a can of beer in the twins' refrigerator and settled wearily into one of the living room chairs.

The famous surgeon, Troy Bittenstern, who had successfully separated two other sets of Siamese twins, just happened to be on the staff of

Fahnstock Memorial. He was summoned from his home in Westchester. He assembled his team in a matter of another hour and went to work. Ramon was obviously dying. The only hope for Carlos was quick surgery. Now Ramon was dead and Carlos was in intensive care fighting for his life.

Dillon thought about Ramon saying, "He's planning to kill me." Of Carlos' need for an alert, intelligent roomer next door. Of the long ruler kept handy by the bed for rapping on the wall: Who carried an eighteen-inch ruler to bed? Had Carlos actually planned this incident which would be terribly dangerous to his own life? Would it be worth the risk to be finally rid of his millstone?

But how? Was there some type of poison strong enough to kill Ramon but not Carlos? Could one Siamese twin be highly allergic to something and the other remain immune?

No one from the carnival, including Uncle Frank, could be located at three A.M. As the twins' only surrogate relative present, Dillon was given Dr. Bittenstern's post-operation report.

"Couldn't save Ramon, but Carlos has a fair chance. Not unusual that Ramon became ill first. He was the parasite twin."

"Parasite twin?"

"Ramon had a smaller, weaker heart. Under better conditions we could probably have separated them successfully, as I told them in a consultation some time ago."

Dillon asked, "Could Carlos have done something to deliberately bring on this situation?"

Bittenstern stared at him. "Why do you ask that?"

"This afternoon Ramon accused Carlos of trying to kill him."

Bittenstern smiled. "Ramon was a crybaby. Always complaining. He didn't have the guts to take the small risk that could have enabled them both to lead a normal life. Carlos hated being a freak. Ramon was too lazy and feckless to be anything else."

Dillon finished off his beer, certain that somehow Carlos had taken the big gamble. He went back to his bedroom, kicked off his loafers, and lay down to sleep. His friend at the medical examiner's office wouldn't be in until nine.

The autopsy on Ramon was made the following day. Tests for poisons were made over a period of a week. The results were negative. Ramon

had no history of allergic reactions. The conclusion of the medical examiner was there there was no evidence that Carlos had done anything deliberately to cause Ramon's death. While there was no real proof of it, he speculated that Carlos had had a mild heart attack, which had naturally caused a more severe reaction in the weaker parasite twin.

During the week he waited for this information, Dillon concentrated on the job he'd been sent to do. Prowling the carnival night after night, he finally recognized Uncle Frank coming out of the show tent that housed the Erotic, Exotic Dancers. He was wearing a wig of curly grey, almost white, hair and dark wraparound glasses.

Two more plainclothesmen were assigned to the carnival and Dillon's instructions were to concentrate on his neighborhood and building. His continued visits to the carnival would arouse suspicion.

But what he had come to look upon as Carlos' perfect crime continued to nag Dillon. He searched the apartment from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling. Such records as Carlos kept offered nothing out of the ordinary. They consisted of bills, bank statements, correspondence with their agent, a few letters from friends, and a box of newspaper clippings and advertising circulars. The clippings mainly publicized the twins' act, though some were concerned with reports of Siamese-twin operations, both successful and unsuccessful.

A scribbled note on a scrap of paper tucked into an old checkbook was interesting, but not much help as evidence. It read, "Dr. Bittenstern away vacationing June 26 to July 15."

It could mean that Carlos would need to get his act together before June 26th or Dr. Bittenstern would not be available to save them. In court, however, Carlos could say he'd merely been planning another consultation with Dr. Bittenstern and had decided to wait until after Bittenstern returned from his vacation.

The bookshelves appeared to offer only faint possibilities, and the job of examining the more than a thousand books seemed monumental. But Dillon did scrutinize the backstraps for titles, going from shelf to shelf methodically. Mystery, suspense, and mainstream novels and bestsellers of any category dominated. Carlos' non-fiction books seemed to cover almost every subject imaginable, from acupuncture to zoology.

Over a period of several hours, Dillon selected five books he thought might have some significance: *The Miraculous Feats of Famous Yogis*, *The Power of Yoga*, *Mastering Yoga*, *The How and Why of Biofeedback*,

and *The New Science of Biofeedback*. He settled into a comfortable chair and skimmed through each volume, pausing at times to read certain sections more carefully. Finally he smiled. He could see himself going to the D.A. with the information that Carlos had perpetrated the murder of his brother by the use of yoga—he'd find himself directing traffic on Staten Island—yet from his reading he had decided that Carlos could indeed have used yoga to kill his brother. If he tried to prove it he'd be laughed out of court. Carlos was not a skilled yogi. It probably took years of practice to hold one's breath for four minutes, to sit in a trance for hours, body ice-cold, pulse so faint as to be almost unmeasurable, almost nonexistent, like death itself. But suppose Carlos had learned just enough to cause Ramon's small heart to fail for lack of support from Carlos's oxygen-rich blood?

But how could it ever be proved? Perhaps, Dillon thought suddenly, Carlos had a teacher, a guru. It was unlikely that Carlos could learn enough from a book and there would be no way to prove he'd even read these books on yoga. A teacher could offer some tangible evidence.

With the help of a yoga instructor at one of the large health clubs, Dillon was able to compile a list of several hundred yogis practicing in the metropolitan area. "Many of them," she told him, "are as phony as a three-dollar bill. But quite a few are real." She checked the names of those she considered legitimate.

It was a difficult telephone search. As soon as he inquired about Siamese twins as students the gurus reacted with varying degrees of amusement and irritation. Some merely hung up. Dillon solved this by constructing a new opening statement he delivered in a stern policeman's voice. He said, "I'm about to ask you a question that may appear to be frivolous, but it is actually quite serious and involves the use of yoga in the commission of a crime."

After fifty-seven calls, he began to feel like a tired old man.

The fifty-eighth call, made to a guru in Hoboken, revived him.

Randikar Nahai said, "Yes, I am consulting Siamese twins. Albinos? Yes, they are white all over only. But one only is pay attention."

Carlos had the jury's sympathy until the prosecution called Guru Nahai to the stand. Light brown in color, with his head shaved, Nahai was five feet two inches tall and almost as wide. He tried to explain about Kundalini ascending from the base of the spine, that Kundalini was Shakti, the

divine power, the serpent, and that by employing pranayama the yogi could reach the transcendent state, samadhi.

The judge interrupted, suggesting that the prosecution ask the witness to confine himself to the strictly physical effects of yoga that might be related to the victim's death.

Nahai said, "But I am telling him about pranayama, which is breath control. Carlos is holding breath so long his brother become sick every time. He is having to give up becoming a yogi."

"How long can you hold your breath?" asked the District Attorney.

"Three, four minutes."

"Would you be willing to demonstrate this for the court?"

Nahai shrugged. He removed his jacket and folded it neatly over the arm of the witness chair, unbuttoned his shirt almost to the waist, then moved the witness chair to the back of its platform. He sank slowly to the floor, bending his legs into the lotus position, his torso remaining rigidly upright. He sat immobile for a few seconds, then took a deep breath. The District Attorney pushed the start button of a stopwatch.

It was an incredibly long three and a half minutes until Nahai released his breath. He continued to sit rigid and not seeming to breathe at all, his eyes blank and unseeing.

Dr. Bittenstern came forward to examine Nahai. He felt Nahai's chest, then held a stethoscope to it for a long time. He removed it, shaking his head. "Amazing," he said.

Called to the stand, Bittenstern testified that such actions on the part of the defendant could have most certainly caused Ramon's death.

The defense called Nahai back to the stand to suggest that Carlos was, after all, only an amateur, not able to duplicate Nahai's performance.

"No, no," said Nahai. "He is better than me. He could be a great yogi master, only it make his brother too sick."

The jury found Carlos guilty. He looked over at Dillon and winked one pink eye.

Taking into account the provocation, the unusual circumstances, and the fact that Carlos was not essentially a violent person likely to kill again, the judge sentenced him to only ten years. He would be out in seven, and, having paid his penalty, would have a chance at the normal life he wanted so desperately.

They never caught up with Hernandez.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Decades of moviegoers have come to associate instantly the crackling of electrical arcs in a laboratory or lightning slashing across an Alpine ravine with the endless series of films Universal Studios fashioned from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein*. The films were America's ultimate tribute to Gothic melodrama on the screen. They were Wagnerian in their scope and power; dark, brooding tales of murder and vengeance. Pennsylvania film scholar Gregory William Mank reminds us how memorable those bizarre dramas really were in his recent study *It's Alive! The Classic Cinema Saga of Frankenstein* (A. S. Barnes), and leads us on a witty and detailed tour of the Frankenstein family tree.

Universal was the perfect studio to bring such a Gothic saga to life. In the early 1930's it comprised a pastoral settlement in the San Fernando foothills called "Little Europa" and run by benign "Uncle Carl" Laemmle, a Bavarian immigrant, and a swarm of his relatives. It had the most picturesque German village backlot set this side of the Black Forest and had recently achieved great box office success with the film version of the stage shocker *Dracula*, which made a star of Bela Lugosi. But the studio, still teetering on the brink of economic collapse, was looking for another sure-fire property, and decided upon the Shelley book. They handed the project to the elegant, sardonic James Whale, an English director who had received considerable artistic notice with films like *Journey's End* and *Waterloo Bridge*. He chose this assignment over others because the story "was the strongest meat and gave me a chance to dabble in the macabre." He dabbled well.

A British actor, Colin Clive, a friend of Whale's and nicely intense and neurotic, was chosen to play the title role of the young scientist who brings life to a creature made up of parts of dead bodies, a creature who will attempt to destroy him and all those he loves. But who was to play Henry Frankenstein's grim creation? Lugosi tested for the part but decided it was beneath him to portray a brute hulk with no lines. James Whale finally chose an unknown English character actor for the role. He had spotted Boris Karloff sipping tea during lunch break at the Universal commissary and liked his gaunt, haunted look. "Your face has startling possibilities," the director told Karloff, and turned him over to make-up genius Jack Pierce for those famous surgical and cranial touches. But the sensitive actor's chief contribution was his wise understanding of the role. The most heartrending aspect of the creature's life, he said, was his ultimate desertion by his creator. Far from just a raging beast, the monster was "one of the most sympathetic characters ever created in the world of English letters." Whale and Karloff together lifted the project to a higher plane than the movie studio had first planned.

The visage of Karloff as Frankenstein's monster became the most frightening face in Hollywood history, and the sequence in which Henry Frankenstein brings the being to life in his watchtower laboratory sputtering with electrical charges is one of cinema's most melodramatic moments. "Think of it," crows the scientist, having plumbed all the electrical secrets of heaven, "the brain of a dead man waiting to live again in a body I made with my own hands!" But things soon go awry. For one thing, a clumsy assistant has unwittingly stolen for Henry a diseased brain. The scarred creation manages to escape the laboratory and, hunted like an animal, turns savage. He kills villagers and ultimately turns on his creator—to be trapped in a burning mill by a mob of torch-bearing townsmen in one of the screen's enduring visual images.

Frankenstein was a towering money-earner for Universal. Inevitably, four years later, a sequel was released. *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) resurrects the creature from a millpond under the charred windmill ruins. Whale deliberately mixed the eerie atmosphere at which he was so skilled with outrageous graveside humor. He employed English cabaret performer Elsa Lanchester as Mary Shelley in a prologue in which, on a stormy night, she tells young Lord Byron the rest of the story. ("I'm all ears," says Byron. "While heaven blasts the night without, open up your pits of hell.") Whale also gave Henry Frankenstein a collaborator, an

eccentric elderly scientist named Dr. Praetorius, who first suggests to Frankenstein that together they build a mate for his creation. The waspish, skeletal Praetorius, who has been expelled from the university for his experiments, twinkles wicked eyes at Henry: "Alone, you have created a man. Together, we will create his mate. A woman. Now that would be *really* interesting."

The monster, meanwhile, has learned to speak, taught by a blind hermit deep in the forest. It is a most poignant sequence, ending with villagers burning the recluse's cabin because they have come upon "the fiend who has been murdering half the countryside!" At the climax, back in his tower laboratory, Henry charges his new creature with life, but she—Elsa Lanchester again—only hisses at her intended groom. Repulsed, the poor suitor reaches for one of those convenient levers and the watchtower explodes in ruins.

Naturally, this was not the end of Henry Frankenstein's creation; we have been told he is indestructible. Three years later *The Son of Frankenstein* arrives at the ancestral castle. From Wolf von Frankenstein (a high-strung Basil Rathbone) we learn that his father Henry has died in exile, and the villagers are all suspicious of any returning family members. Lionel Atwill as a one-armed police inspector—the creature had torn off the other years before—warns Wolf that he is quite unpopular. A bearded, broken-necked scoundrel named Ygor (Bela Lugosi) is lurking nearby, an evil shepherd who has somehow survived a public hanging. It is only a question of time before Wolf, aided by Ygor, has discovered the comatose creature in the laboratory ruins and attempts to bring it back to full life in order to "vindicate" his father. "Every incredible story the villagers tell about my father's creation," he muses, "I now believe to be absolutely true!"

Son of Frankenstein was far more dark and Teutonic than the arch *Bride*, for James Whale had been replaced by the grim Roland V. Lee. Against brooding, expressionistic sets, the creature once again meets its ritual end—toppled into a bubbling sulphur pit. That end was, of course, merely temporary.

Karloff had wisely decided, for the sake of his enlarging career, not to play the creature again, so Lon Chaney, Jr., took on the role in *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942). Ygor has managed to free the creature from its sulphur tomb and together they seek out another of Henry's sons, Ludwig Frankenstein (Sir Cedric Hardwicke). Ludwig at first wants nothing to

do with the monster, but a sly and evil assistant (Lionel Atwill again) suggests that the monster went wrong only because it had a diseased, criminal brain. What if it were replaced by the brain of a *good* man? Providentially, a noble fellow scientist has just been accidentally killed. . . . Secretly, however, the crippled Ygor approaches Atwill with the suggestion that they use *his* brain, freeing him of his crooked body. In return, he will use his strength to make Atwill "president of the university"! Of course, everything manages to go badly, villagers intervene, and an exploding laboratory again collapses upon a hapless monster and an even more hapless Ludwig, the first of the Frankensteins (and the least culpable) to die at the climax of one of the films.

A new menace was added in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943) wherein Lon Chaney, Jr., returned to his role as the tortured lycanthrope, Larry Talbot, and Bela Lugosi at last played the monster (presumably because it has been implanted with Ygor's brain). This film featured the last member of the troubled family to appear in the series, Ludwig's daughter Baroness Elsa (Ilona Massey). She survives but the creatures are swept away by the rushing waters of an exploding dam.

Needless to say, at the start of *House of Frankenstein* (1944) both the undying monster and the wolf man are discovered frozen in an ice cave and are warmed back to life by Boris Karloff, this time playing a scientist imprisoned for evil experiments in vivisection. By the end of that film the creature has pulled Karloff into quicksand, only to surface in *House of Dracula* (1945) in mud.

The final Universal entry in the saga reduced the series to burlesque. In *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), the creature has been shipped to Florida. (For the last three films he was played by stuntman-actor Glenn Strange.) The evil Dr. Sandra Mornay (Lenore Aubert) does not wish to repeat Frankenstein's mistake "and revive a vicious, unmanageable brute. This time, the monster must have no will of his own." Lou Costello's brain—"so simple, so pliable"—is chosen, but before that can happen the creature plunges from a burning dock into a Florida lake. A sad, hardly fitting end, but the film itself had some nicely Gothic touches.

In the 1950's England's Hammer Studios began a whole new series, concentrating, however, on Dr. Frankenstein (Peter Cushing, mostly) and creating a new being in each film. Somehow, though, it never had quite the impact of Universal's deathless creature, that (in the words of Boris Karloff) "dear monster."

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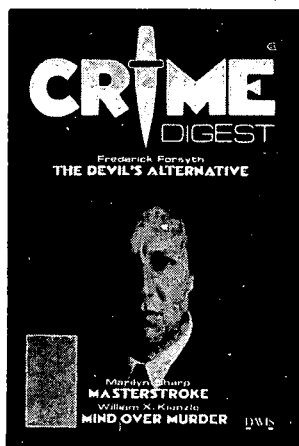
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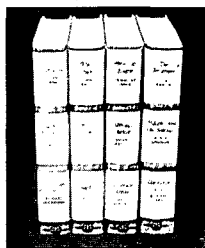
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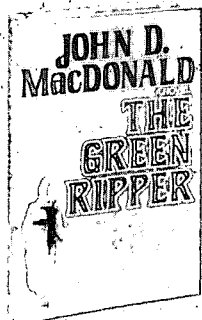
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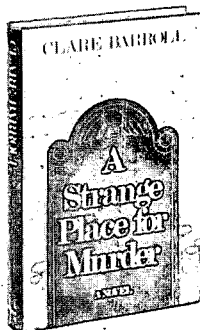
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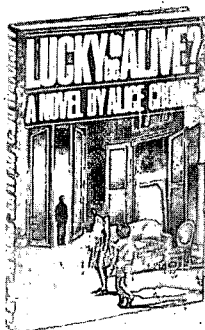
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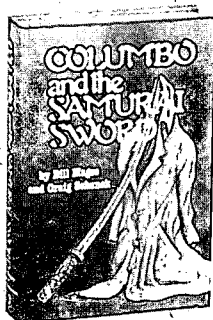
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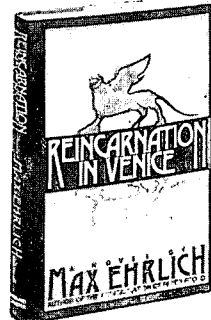
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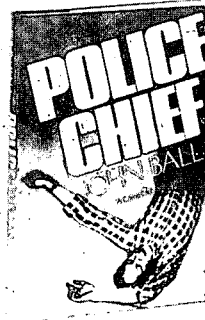
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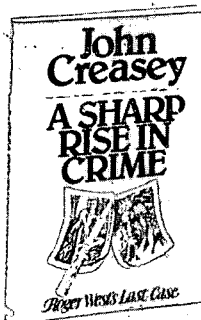
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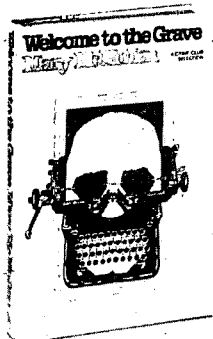
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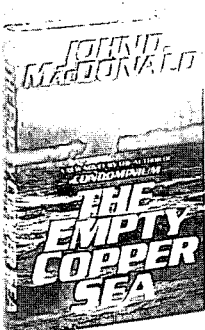
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